

# Theology After Christendom

Forming Prophets for a Post-Christian World

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## Chapter 2

### Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Christian Formation in a Disciple-Making Culture

*Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!*

— Numbers 11:29

#### **What is Prophecy?**

Prophecy is a term that has been so universally misunderstood by Christians that when a genuinely prophetic word is spoken, most people are unable to perceive it. Prophecy has been cheapened and demeaned by those who associate it with bizarre speculation about the end times. It therefore needs to be said at the outset that true prophecy has nothing to do with speculative ferment that indulges in biblical code-cracking or date-setting for Doomsday. Prophecy has nothing to do with facile speculations that attempt to find specious connections between the apocalyptic Beast and prominent political or religious leaders. Despite all the online ferment and far-fetched conspiracy theories, there's nothing prophetic about trying to identify Antichrist and the False Prophet with Barack Obama, Paul McCartney or the Spice Girls. In fact, prophecy is *not* about trying to set out a mechanical itinerary of future events. Such efforts are even antagonistic to the true meaning of prophecy.

The true goal of biblical prophecy, rather, as Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), pointed out, is 'to indicate what is possible and to deflect what should not be, by an appeal to repentance and courage.'<sup>1</sup> The prophet sees the present in light of eternity and is able to perceive God's redemptive purposes in the world. Prophecy is not a matter of 'arbitrary prediction' but

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<sup>1</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, translated by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 246.

'attempts to delineate the underlying pattern to which historical events are likely to conform.'<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev concurs that, 'is not prediction, it is not a forecasting of events. Rather, it is the vision which apprehends things present in the light of their eternal issues. It is apocalyptic, it is an unveiling.'<sup>3</sup> The prophet envisages the future across the boundaries of the present, but she sees only as one looking through a glass darkly.

The truly prophetic figure is thus someone who is aware of the spiritual forces acting in history and knows all the possibilities contained within the infinite sphere of the effective action of God for whom all things are possible. Prophecy is therefore not a matter of passive expectation, but of creative realization of the best possibilities that will maximize the thriving of God's good creation and the flourishing of all its human (and non-human) inhabitants. As Berdyaev maintains, 'It is not true that the prophet is merely a passive instrument in the hand of God. In prophetism humanity too is in the highest degree active; prophecy is a divine-human activity, it is divine-human creativeness.'<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding its human instrumentality, prophecy is wholly dependent on the activity and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who inspires the prophet's imagination to reenvision reality from an eternal perspective. Since they operate on the level of grace and spirit, whereas most people remain at the level of the mundane reality, prophets can be lonely people. Kierkegaard, himself a prophet for his times, expressed a great truth when he wrote that, 'Truth always rests with the minority, and the minority is always stronger than the majority, because the minority is generally formed by those who really have an opinion, while the strength of a majority is illusory, formed by the gangs who have no opinion.'<sup>5</sup> Even more provocatively, Berdyaev proposes that, 'Truth may be revealed to one

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lincoln, *Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake's Vala or 'The Four Zoas'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>3</sup> George Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: J. Clarke, 1950), 119.

<sup>4</sup> Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 176.

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, edited by P. P. Rohde (London: Peter Owen, 1960).

person only and be refused by the rest of the world: it may be prophetic and a prophet is always lonely.<sup>6</sup>

Prophets are generally more interested in what God is doing in the world than in what Christians are doing in churches. Words of prophecy can be found not only in ancient canonical texts, but also in art, poetry, music and even, as one popular song of the 1960s reminds us, 'on the subway walls and tenement halls.'<sup>7</sup> Prophets are usually antagonistic to the dominant currents of thought that prevail in social life. Prophets fulminate against errors that have become so widespread among Christians that they often feel completely alone and isolated, as if their voice were as one crying in the wilderness.

Despite its original and often unexpected character, prophecy does not always have to be about innovation. Sometimes a prophetic message can be as simple as the injunction to 'Stand at the crossroads and look for the ancient paths' (Jer. 6:16). Most crucially, the prophet reminds us that God's ways are not our ways and that His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isa. 55:8). The prophet warns us that 'what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God' (Lk. 16:15) and that, conversely, those things and people that we hold in contempt are often glorious in God's eyes. This idea is poignantly expressed in this prayer known as 'The Invocation of the Holy Spirit' from *Celtic Daily Prayer* of the Northumbria Community: 'Most powerful Holy Spirit, come down upon us and subdue us; from heaven where the ordinary is made glorious; and glory seems but ordinary.'<sup>8</sup>

Prophets have diverse social and economic backgrounds. They can be humble shepherds or sycamore fig farmers (Amos) or they can be descended from a distinguished lineage of priests (Ezekiel); they can even be courtiers of the ruling elite (Isaiah). The prophetic message likewise has

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<sup>6</sup> Berdyaev, *Truth and Revelation*, quoted in D. A. Lowrie (ed.), *Christian Existentialism: A Berdyaev Anthology* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), 167.

<sup>7</sup> Simon and Garfunkel, 'Sounds of Silence' (Columbia Records, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> Northumbria Community, *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2002), 273.

diverse expressions. Prophecy can involve lamentation<sup>9</sup>, exhortation<sup>10</sup>, and protest.<sup>11</sup> Prophets inveigh against idolatry and religious complacency.<sup>12</sup> The prophet reminds people that God demands mercy and true knowledge of Him more than sacrifice and burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6; cf. 1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 40:6). The prophet decries the hypocrisy of praising God with one's lips and, at the same time, denying him in one's heart (Is. 29:13; Matt. 15:8). The prophet is as unafraid to speak truth to power as she is to weep for the wretched state of the world. The prophet testifies to the truth of Christ that opposes the institutional lies that uphold the structural injustice of a society that has taken leave of God.<sup>13</sup>

Prophets say things that people often do not want to hear; they may bring 'a word out of season' (2 Tim. 4:2). Therefore, prophecy can be dangerous, not only for the powerful people and institutions against whom the prophecy is directed, but also for the prophets themselves. A. W. Tozer (1897–1963) explained that, 'The essence of the message of the prophet is truth. Truth is always a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways. There is a cost factor for the prophet to deliver the message, and there is a cost factor for us to receive that message.'<sup>14</sup> The Bible provides abundant illustrations of the cost of prophecy. The prophets of ancient Israel were locked up (Jer. 37); ignored (Is. 6); persecuted (2 Kgs 17:33); and despised and rejected (Is. 53). Sometimes the truth to which the prophet testifies is 'unbearable' for an entire people (Amos 7:10). Therefore, prophets speak a word of truth to their own people, but they are not usually received by their own (Jn 1:11).

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<sup>9</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Is. 1:10–14 and Zeph. 1:1–3:20.

<sup>11</sup> Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse of John from a South African Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015). My thanks to Nick Megoran for bringing this source to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 98.

<sup>13</sup> The role of the prophet as one who exposes structural injustice is a keynote of Jon Sobrino's transformative theology. See Stephen J. Pope, 'On Not Abandoning the Historical World to its Wretchedness: A Prophetic Voice Serving an Incarnational Vision', in Pope (ed.), *Hope and Solidarity: Jon Sobrino's Challenge to Christian Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Tozer, *Voice of a Prophet: Who Speaks for God?*, edited by J. L. Snyder (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2014), 41.

Not only are prophets usually 'acquainted with grief' and held in low esteem (Is. 53:3), but history is full of examples of prophetic individuals, from Socrates (c.470–399 BC) to Martin Luther King Jr (1929–1968), who came to a sticky end. One thinks not only of the biblical prophets Zechariah, John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Stephen, and nearly all of Jesus's disciples, but also of more recent prophets, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), Edith Stein (1891–1942), Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), Oscar Romero (1917–1980), Alexander Men (1935–1990), Pavel Adelgeim (1938–2013), Brother Roger of Taize (1915–2005), Sister Dorothy Stang (1931–2005), Serhiy Nigoyan (1993–2014), Boris Nemtsov (1959–2015) and Jo Cox (1974–2016), who also all suffered violent deaths because they took a brave stand for truth and justice.

The sacramental interpretation of Christianity, which prevails in Christendom-minded churches, is inimical to the spirit of biblical prophecy. Christendom, for all its magnificent artistic, architectural and literary accomplishments, in its theology tended to be prosaic, literalistic and dogmatic. Prophetic discourse, by contrast, is lively, poetic and often disturbing. Therefore, when prophecy was not actively or violently resisted, the prophet's voice tended to go unheeded or even unheard altogether. The Christendom Church was tone-deaf to prophecy. As theologians have observed, it is hard to bring a prophetic message to a 'prosaic world' that cannot comprehend symbolic language.<sup>15</sup> In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), 'God needs prophets in order to make himself known, and all prophets are necessarily artistic.'<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Berdyaev contends that, 'God reveals himself to the world in the prophets, in the Son, in the Spirit, in . . . men and women who have attained the summits of spiritual vision and who, while sharing the destiny of the world, do not feel at ease in the world.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen C. Rowan, *Nicene Creed: Poetic Words for a Prosaic World* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Balthasar, quoted in Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 163.

<sup>17</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 175.

Although some prophetic figures did arise within Christendom, they tended to do so in opposition to the established churches, which viewed prophets with suspicion and even hostility. In many cases, they were ostracized as troublemakers or persecuted as blasphemers by the ecclesiastical authorities. Prophets are particularly unpopular among their own people, who can pay them homage only when the prophet is safely dead. As Dostoevsky remarked, 'People do not receive their prophets, but kill them, whereas they love their martyrs and honour those they have slain.'<sup>18</sup> It has long been acknowledged that, 'A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house' (Mk 6:4).

Therefore, most of the outstanding prophetic figures in Western history have arisen from outside the church, sometimes even in explicit opposition to the established church – e.g. Marx, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Joyce, etc.<sup>19</sup> Perceiving their own prophets as a threat, the churches of Christendom have not known what to do with them and have tended to downplay their significance or to castigate them as mad, deluded or heretical. The cry of Nietzsche's Zarathustra offers an exemplary instance of prophetic lament in the face of the opposition and misunderstanding to which the prophet is fated: 'They understand me not: I am not the mouth for these ears . . . Calm is my soul, and clear, like the mountains in the morning. But they think me cold, and a mocker with terrible jests. And now do they look at me and laugh: and while they laugh they hate me too. There is ice in their laughter.'<sup>20</sup>

Prophets can be radically out of step with the march of the prevailing culture. G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) remarked that, 'it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.'<sup>21</sup> Prophets can be eccentric and are often stigmatized as oddballs

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<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky, *Bratya Karamazovy* (Moscow: Bertelsmann Media, 2011), 296.

<sup>19</sup> This is the case even though all the figures enumerated here were brought up within Christian households and exhibited faith and even deep piety in their childhoods.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, translated by T. Common (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986),

and antisocial misfits. Christendom churches and the wider society are likely to classify them as insane and perhaps even seek to get them sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Often, they are either politely ignored or openly ridiculed. The biblical prophets certainly did some bizarre things, such as using dung to bake bread and lying on their side for months at a time (Ez. 4:4-12); others spent three years walking around Jerusalem naked and barefoot as a sign against Egypt and Ethiopia (Is. 20:3).

Some prophets were even 'mad' enough to believe that evil could be overcome by good, that truth triumphs over falsehood and that the way to deal with one's enemies was to love them all the way through to reconciliation (Lk. 23:34; Rom. 5:8). Prophets, in the words of Leonardo Boff, are 'people moved by the inner fire who have kept alive and held high the human hope that it is not the brutality of the real that has the last word but the power of that which can bring a better future.'<sup>22</sup> Prophets remind not only the church, but also the world that, 'The last word will not be that of death but of the transfiguration of life in all its fullness.'<sup>23</sup> Their whole lives testified against the cycles of deceit and violence that govern the ways of the world. No wonder many of them met a violent or undignified end.

The prophet is endowed with faculties of spiritual perception that make visible the savagery of demonic spirits that incarnate themselves within the banality and triviality of everyday existence and the institutions that sustain social life. In an eloquent tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., who was one of the most remarkable prophets of the twentieth century, Max Stackhouse comments on the prophetic vision of the black Baptist pastor from Georgia:

'We were blinded by our racism and our economic advantages. We kept talking of prejudice and demonstrations, of discrimination and civil disorder . . . And he [Luther King] was telling us about sin and salvation, about

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<sup>22</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Christianity in a Nutshell* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Boff, *Christianity*, 69.

chaos and community, about justice and redemption. We spoke of urban strife He told us that the Lord has a controversy with his people. We worried about those we pitied. He spoke of the soul of a nation in sin. We saw modern society in a situation of stress. He saw it to be founded on a metaphysical disease of racism and violence and economic self-interest. We saw problems to be solved. He saw systematic death to be overcome. Our diagnosis was much milder than his. We wrung our hands. He acted in faith.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, the prophet is endowed with a special ability to penetrate beyond the façade of superficial social reality and to bring to light the true nature of the issues. Martin Luther King Jr. was able to perceive that racism was not merely a social wrong pathology, but a spiritual disorder and a blasphemous distortion of God's intentions. He saw that racism had brought divine judgement upon the nation as a whole. As is well known, this brave and principled prophet was assassinated. For a racist society that was propped up by an ideological crutch of lies and prejudice, the truth to which the prophet testified was too much to bear.

Therefore, when the prophet raises their voice, the world typically responds with the predictable cry of 'crucify him, crucify him' (Lk. 23:21). The world will always seek to crucify the truth, because truth is deeply disturbing and unsettling.<sup>25</sup> This sad reality lies behind the quip, often attributed to George Bernard Shaw, that, 'If you want to tell people the truth, be sure to make them laugh. Otherwise they'll kill you.' Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'mistake' was that he brought people not to laughter, but to tears and repentance, which is why they killed him.

Despite the danger and disturbance that prophecy invariably evokes, in post-Christendom, it is vital that the Christian community should rediscover its prophetic or revolutionary vocation in a post-Christian world.

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<sup>24</sup> Max Stackhouse, in S. R., Paeth et al. (eds.), *Shaping Public Theology: Selections from the Writings of Max L. Stackhouse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 31.

<sup>25</sup> Berdyaev asserts that, 'Christianity is the religion of crucified truth.' See Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo Dukha i Tsarstvo Kesarya* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), 326.

This calls for a vision of spiritual formation which will enable people to perceive the 'signs of the times' (σημεία τῶν καιρῶν – cf. Matt. 16:3) and to discern the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world. Prophecy, like all the *charismata* of the Holy Spirit, is not a competence that can be acquired from taking a course in theology, but it is a gift that can be nurtured and produced as the fruit of discipleship and spiritual formation into Christlikeness. All people who claim allegiance to Christ should be prophets to the extent that they are learning to perceive the world through the eyes of love and thus to see things in the light of eternity.

### **The Need for Depth and Authenticity**

In the same way that all Christians are prophets, so it is that all Christians are theologians. To be a Christian is to be a theologian to the extent that all Christians express faith convictions in the way they interact with the world.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it could even be claimed that even those who self-identify as atheists engage with theological questions to the extent that they express transcendent longings, which are an inherent part of the human condition. As Berdyaev maintained, 'the revolt against God and especially the moral revolt, presupposes the existence of God.' He thus added that, 'In reality no atheists exist; there are only idolaters.'<sup>27</sup>

I am convinced that God looks kindlier upon a sincere agnostic than upon a Christian hypocrite. Sincere atheism may even be closer to God than apathetic, nominal Christianity that characterizes so much church life in the diminishing fragments of Christendom. 'Even the fight against God may be a service to God and more religious than a lukewarm and apathetic Christianity.'<sup>28</sup> Similarly, I am persuaded that an open-minded Muslim who loves her neighbor is closer to the Kingdom of God than a Christian bigot, who upholds sound doctrine, but who expresses fear, suspicion and even

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human*, translated by R. M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsialnaya Dialektika*, 511.

hatred towards those who are different. In other words, the compassionate Muslim receives God's grace, whereas the 'Christian' racist stands under God's judgement. Blumhardt remarked that, 'The world no longer tolerates heartless people who try to pass as pious. To love all people, to love the world, to despise and condemn nothing – this is what is paving the way for God's kingdom in our time.'<sup>29</sup>

Christian faith in a post-Christendom key thus prioritizes depth, authenticity and compassion over tribal identities and belief systems. This emphasis facilitates the reengagement of faith and practice. Post-Christendom theology thus offers a critical perspective that facilitates the process through which faith and practice are correlated. To the extent that Christians attempt to live out their faith convictions, they can be said to be engaged in some form of theological reflection. Therefore, every Christian is to some extent a theologian. Dallas Willard explains this point eloquently:

'Theology is a stuffy word, but it should be an everyday one. That's what practical theology does. It makes theology a practical part of life. A theology is only a way of thinking about and understanding – or misunderstanding – God. Practical theology studies the manner in which our actions interact with God to accomplish his ends in human life . . . Practical theology's overall task is, in effect, to develop for practical implementation the methods by which women and men interact with God to fulfil the divine intent for human existence.'<sup>30</sup>

The choice for a Christian is never between either having a theology or not having a theology; the choice is always between having a good theology or having a bad one. A good theology is one that is life-giving, life-enhancing and faithful to the biblical teaching, whereas a bad theology is one that is shallow, thoughtless, life-denying and which reduces the God to a sterile,

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<sup>29</sup> Blumhardt, *Gospel of God's Reign*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), 14–15.

one-dimensional caricature. A bad theology can be compared to spiritual junk food. A.W. Tozer even referred to the 'toxic food' that is often fed to Christians and which leads to unfortunate symptoms of gospel-denying superficiality and 'celebrity Christianity'. 'This toxic food', Tozer explains, 'is a little bit of psychology, a little bit of inspiration, a dash of theology, a touch of Bible and a whole lot of personality.'<sup>31</sup>

Theology is therefore not a dry academic discipline, but an inevitable and unavoidable part of the life of every Christian. William C. Placher concurs that, 'If Christians pretend not to think about theology, we end up with unexamined theology, sometimes in forms that are silly or even dangerous.'<sup>32</sup> Willard maintains that, 'Theology is a part of our lives. It's unavoidable. And . . . a thoughtless theology guides our lives with just as much force as a thoughtful or informed one.'<sup>33</sup> Among Christians, part of the problem is that most people, as Grenz and Olson observe, 'live in the world of popular theology, not of academic theology.' In popular theology, 'biblical doctrine becomes fused with elements of popular culture to form various expressions of Christian faith.' Popular or 'folk theology' constitutes a level of Christian conviction which 'rejects critical reflection and enthusiastically embraces simplistic acceptance of an informal tradition of beliefs and practices composed mainly of clichés and legends.'<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to the superficiality of appearances, sound-bites and slogans that characterize our present 'visually aggressive age',<sup>35</sup> theology issues an invitation to deep living, to deep questioning and to abundant life (Jn 10:10; Ps. 42:7). Richard Foster opened his landmark book, *Celebration of Discipline*, with a prophetic statement: 'Superficiality is the curse of our age . . . The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent

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<sup>31</sup> Tozer, *Voice of a Prophet*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 1–2; cf. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> See chapter 2 of Roger E. Olson and Stanley J Grenz, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (London: Bantam, 1997), 141.

people, or gifted people, but for deep people.<sup>36</sup> Spiritual depth comes not from being inducted into systems of sound doctrine or by attending Christian meetings, but through disciplined, costly commitment to following the Risen Christ.

The tragedy of the contemporary church is that instead of being a movement for the transformation of the world, in many cases the church has become an alternative leisure pursuit, primarily for middle class religious consumers. Many churches have capitulated to the ideologies of consumerism, individualism, careerism, respectability and security, which resemble more the idols of middle class morality than the radical, self-denying and communitarian values of Christ and his gospel.

Attempting to respond to cultural trends, many churches have ended up mimicking the worst features of consumer culture by packaging Christianity into a marketable bundle of theological propositions that can be distributed and sold to religious consumers. The prevailing assumption has been that once these propositions have been 'accepted', the religious consumer receives the 'full package' of benefits, including, most importantly, forgiveness of sins and eternal life. As Dallas Willard rightly argues, this creates the unbiblical notion that 'you can have a faith in Christ that brings forgiveness, while in every other respect your life is no different from that of others who have no faith in Christ at all.'<sup>37</sup> James McClendon sets out a more integrated vision of how mission and discipleship cohere: 'The faithfulness of Christ made it possible for us to be his disciples, citizens of his new kingdom. And our faith, our faithful response to him, is the quality of our lives as disciples, as citizens of the kingdom. To put it in a stylish, but I hope helpful way, Christ's faithfulness is the objective possibility of our salvation.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), 44.

<sup>38</sup> McClendon, quoted in Curtis Freeman's 'Introduction: A Theology for Radical Believers and Other Baptists', in McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Volume 3: Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), xxvi.

One of the most urgent tasks of post-Christendom theology is therefore to repair the broken connections between mission, discipleship, life and salvation. As a result of the Christendom tendency towards nominalism, saving faith has often been cheapened into 'mental assent to correct doctrine.'<sup>39</sup> Such a conception of cheap faith is as far removed from the teaching of Jesus as the opposite error of assuming that salvation depends on the performance of good deeds. What results from nominal Christianity is the unexamined assumption that progress in the discipleship will 'somehow automatically take place through the normal course of life, if only the [believer] holds on to certain beliefs.'<sup>40</sup> Such notions of 'cheap grace' constitute little more than a truncated 'gospel of sin management',<sup>41</sup> rather than a transformative vision of life in the Kingdom of God, which was always at the heart of Jesus's proclamation of the gospel. This leads to the unacknowledged assumption of some Christians that 'Jesus can "save" us when we die, but . . . on earth he should leave us in peace.'<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, in Christendom, apart from church attendance and mental assent to a system of belief, there is very little that sets Christians apart from the unbelievers among the general population.<sup>43</sup> The faith of Christendom has tended to reduce salvation in Christ to cognitive fidelity to certain doctrines. The assumption has often been that salvation is a matter of passing down the 'deposit of faith' (*depositum fidei*)<sup>44</sup> in doctrines that can be affirmed in order to guarantee salvation. As a result of this passive understanding of salvation, the gospel has been deprived of its transforming power. Dallas Willard thus laments, that 'More often than not, faith has failed, sadly enough, to transform the human character of the

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<sup>39</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 2 of Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*.

<sup>42</sup> Blumhardt, *The Gospel of God's Reign: Living for the Kingdom of God*, translated by P. Rutherford et al. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 1.

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, the findings of the 2006 Barna Group Survey, which showed that among the population of the USA, there are no considerable differences between the lifestyles of those who self-identify as 'born-again Christians' and those who did not regard themselves as 'Christians.' See <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/american.study.reveals.indulgent.lifestyle.christians.no.difference/9439.htm> [accessed 7.1.2016].

<sup>44</sup> Niels Christian Hvidt, *Christian Prophecy: The Post-Biblical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

masses, because it is usually unaccompanied by discipleship and by an overall discipline of life such as Christ himself practiced.<sup>45</sup> Remarking on the lack of distinctiveness of a typical 'born-again Christian', Tozer notes that, 'His life is unchanged; he still lives for his own pleasure, only now he takes delight in singing choruses and watching religious movies instead of singing bawdy songs and drinking hard liquor. The accent is still on enjoyment, though the fun is now on a higher plane morally if not intellectually.'<sup>46</sup>

The failure of many Christians to distinguish themselves from the blandness and workaday existence of life in a sinful world has created the impression that it is possible to believe in Christ without aspiring to be conformed either morally or spiritually in His image. As a result, there are many so-called Christians who, as Kierkegaard explains, 'instead of following Christ are snugly and comfortably settled, with family and steady promotion, under the guise that their activity is the Christianity of the New Testament.'<sup>47</sup> In contrast to superficial notions of 'conversion' and decadent 'bourgeois Christianity', F. W. Robertson (1816–1853) formulated a more profound definition of Christian identity when he claimed that, 'A Christian is one who is in the process of restoring God's original likeness to his character.'<sup>48</sup>

Post-Christendom offers an opportunity to think of Christian identity in terms of character and convictions, rather than doctrines and beliefs. In Christendom the differences between born-again Christians and the general population tend to be primarily cosmetic, concerning matters of doctrine, worldview and behavior. At the deeper, structural level of consciousness and spiritual formation, many Christians are just as captive to the anti-gospel forces of consumerism and are just as indifferent to the pain of the world as everyone else. Tozer, again, notes that, 'Our error today is that

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<sup>45</sup> Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 230.

<sup>46</sup> Tozer, quoted in Todd Tomasella, *I Die Daily: 1 Corinthians 15:31: Daily Presenting our Bodies a Living Sacrifice* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009), 172.

<sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Robertson, quoted in Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev: An Introduction*.

we do not expect a converted man [*sic*] to be a transformed man, and as a result of this error our churches are full of substandard Christians.<sup>49</sup> In the same spirit, Berdyaev lamented that, 'Christians, people who believe in God, live and arrange their affairs on earth as if God did not exist, as if there had been no Sermon on the Mount. Christians, like non-Christians, live according to the law of the world and not according to the law of God.'<sup>50</sup>

For instance, it has been shown that Christians in the West on average spend just as much time on Facebook and Twitter, send as many text messages and spend as much time watching television and playing video games as those who do not self-identify as Christians. Many Christians have faithfully been attending religious services on Sundays (and perhaps also the midweek fellowship meetings) and have then spent the rest of the week living like everyone else – i.e. according to the predictable patterns and routines that determine the life of the world. Many Christians are just as affected by spiritual fatigue and seem to have lost the capacity to ask ultimate questions.

Consequently, society has remained without a transformative influence as Christians unwittingly relinquish their vocation to be salt and light. Jesus was clear on this point when he said to his disciples: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot' (Matt. 5:13). Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919) made a similar telling remark concerning the ways that many Christians have abandoned the prophetic call of Christ to change the world, and have instead been content to found religious clubs:

'Our task is to 'put on the new self' (Col. 3:9–11). If we strive to do this, and if the boredom of our theology and our Christianity has not already killed us, we can become people truly enthusiastic for Jesus. If Christ alone

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<sup>49</sup> Tozer, *Evenings with Tozer: Daily Devotional Readings*, edited by G. B. Smith (Chicago, IL: First Moody Publishers, 2015), 300.

<sup>50</sup> Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsialnaya Dialektika*, 439.

is our light and life, then we can possibly be of some help to those who don't believe. But religious talk is useless (Matt. 7:21). So is forming some kind of religious community where everyone sits together in a corner and prays and reads the Bible. No, make an effort to get rid of the lies that darken this world. Do this by endeavoring to live with an upright heart, in the power of God's truth.<sup>51</sup>

Christians living in the midst of post-Christendom must not be content with attending services or even professing so-called sound doctrine. Followers of the Risen Christ are called not to be separate from the world, to retreat into religious shelters and church buildings, but to *dissolve* like salt (i.e. after the pattern of Matt. 5:13) into the wider society and thereby to be a catalyst for humanizing forces, such as compassion, dignity, respect and courtesy. There needs to be a concentrated, focused and coordinated strategy to overcome the lies, deceit and inhumanity that characterizes so much of our public life. Meeting in church buildings on Sunday mornings and singing escapist songs that make vacuous professions of romantic love to Jesus will not change the world, but will merely perpetuate a religious subculture and widen the gulf between faith and life.

### **Taking a Prophetic Stand for Truth in a World of Lies**

In a world in which lies and deceit constitute the default mode of social reality, it is very difficult to live in the truth. Winston Churchill once quipped that, 'A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on.' Since social reality is saturated in falsehood and superficiality, it takes sustained effort and constant vigilance to live in the depth of truth. Twentieth century existentialist philosophy has compellingly demonstrated that it is far easier and more comforting to live a lie than to live the truth.<sup>52</sup> Truth is hard work, but the gospel of truth demands nothing less than uncompromising allegiance to a life of truth and authenticity.

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<sup>51</sup> Blumhardt, *Everyone Belongs to God* (Robertsbridge: Plough, 2015), 34–5.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Philosophical Ontology*,

The gospel presents every human being with a basic choice: either to choose the authentic existence of 'walking in the truth' with Christ (cf. 3 Jn 1:4) or to live an inauthentic existence in which we lose ourselves to the trivial distractions of entertainment and superficiality. In other words, the basic human choice, as one notable existentialist theologian put it, is between God and the world: 'Will we live life with Christ or without Christ?'<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Berdyaev once remarked that, 'There are two fundamentally different types of people: those whose relationship with the world is accommodating and harmonious, and those who are continually at variance with it.'<sup>54</sup> This corresponds with the incisive critique of Tozer, who lamented that, 'The weakness of so many modern Christians is that they feel too much at home in the world. In their effort to achieve restful adjustment to unregenerate society they have lost their pilgrim character and become an essential part of the very moral order against which they are sent to protest.'<sup>55</sup>

The cultural environment of triviality, mass media, sensationalism and 'the doctrine of instant satisfaction'<sup>56</sup> present formidable obstacles to spiritual formation into Christlikeness. Part of the goal of theological formation is to empower people to protest against the blind acceptance of traditions and customs inspired by what Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) called the 'herd instinct' (*Herdentrieb*)<sup>57</sup> that governs the collective consciousness, which is sometimes labelled 'public opinion' or the 'will of the people.' Such protest may put Christians in the difficult and costly position of being a despised minority amid a herd of 'people talking without speaking; people hearing without listening.'<sup>58</sup> If the default position of

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translated by H. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 462; Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Human Freedom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, translated by T. Sadler (London: Continuum, 2005). For an in-depth discussion of this topic from a Christian existentialist perspective, see N. A. Berdyaev, *O Rabstve i Svobode Cheloveka* (Paris: YMCA, 1939).

<sup>53</sup> John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology* (London: SCM, 1960), 22.

<sup>54</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Man the Dwelling Place of God: What it Means to Have Christ Living in You* (London: Kingsway, 1966), 98.

<sup>56</sup> Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Günter Abel, *Nietzsche: die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 54.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, 'Sounds of Silence' (Columbia Records, 1964).

society is falsehood and superficiality, then those who pursue the truth and depth will inevitably be in the minority. This is the tragic irony of prophecy, as countless prophets through the ages, from Jesus Christ to Martin Luther King Jr., have demonstrated. The prophet may have been proved right in the end, but this did not prevent them from meeting a violent end.

The world's current penchant for violence is just one indication of such a disregard for truth. Violence testifies to the 'poverty and hysteria of the modern consciousness.'<sup>59</sup> Violence is one of the many baneful manifestations of the poverty of imagination in a world ruled by technological gadgetry, celebrity culture, junk TV and various forms of mind-numbing propaganda, including the alluring lies disseminated by the industries of advertising and so-called PR. Under such conditions, people live under the illusion that the violent feelings and extreme xenophobic views that they have adopted as a result of watching and listening to the mass media are their own. They become 'victims of the information deluge.'<sup>60</sup> 'Public opinion' is the product of what social identity theorists have called 'group think',<sup>61</sup> which turns groups into the kind of demonic collectives characterized by Jesus in Milton's *Paradise Regained* as 'a miscellaneous rabble, who extol things vulgar.'<sup>62</sup>

Followers of the Risen Christ can be at the spearhead of a new cultural movement that resists the violent tendencies and zoological impulses of contemporary society. In such a world where living in socially-constructed illusions of violence and falsehood is the 'default position', formation into the likeness of Christ – who embodies the gospel values of love and truth – is hard work and requires great moral strength and spiritual engagement. In Christendom, many people, including those who profess Christian faith, have become either willfully distracted or have had their compassionate faculties numbed by the constant assaults by the popular media on the

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<sup>59</sup> Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 132.

<sup>60</sup> Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 145.

<sup>61</sup> M. A. Hogg and K. D. Williams, 'From I to We: Social Identity and the Collective Self', *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice* 4 (2000), 81–97.

<sup>62</sup> Milton, quoted in Paul Hammond, *Milton and the People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 231.

values of truth, respect, dignity and humanity. Berdyaev noted prophetically that people are capable of 'paralyzing their consciousness through a system of hypnosis, of psychological . . . poisoning.'<sup>63</sup> Under a constant barrage, these values are gradually eroded as power, greed, selfishness, image and violence triumph over freedom, generosity, solidarity, substance and peace.

Such a condition leads to a distortion of people's moral conscience and induces people to call good that which is evil and to name as evil that which is good (Is. 5:20; cf. Mk 3:22-30; Matt. 12:31-32). For example, the personal sins of egoism, narcissism, self-seeking, careerism, deceit and aggression are baptized and sanctified by the new religions of PR and celebrity worship. The most pernicious falsehoods are disseminated in such a way as to cause maximum offence. Newspaper columnists try to outdo each other in attaining new levels of depravity and inhumanity. Vulgar gossip and obscene xenophobic views are printed in tabloids and posted on blogs, which are eagerly consumed by a credulous public that seeks not truth and enlightenment, but titillation and entertainment. One person's tragedy is another's amusement.

Under such conditions, the Holy Spirit is quenched, human dignity is debased and the powers and principalities are unleashed in all their destructive fury. Lies, myths and fabrications are hostile not only to the truth, but to life itself and to the humane, life-affirming values of the gospel. James Alison explains that, 'leading us into the whole truth means the active and creative overcoming of the lie which is at the root of human culture.'<sup>64</sup> Contemporary post-Christendom society is in revolt against the gospel and thus stands under the judgement of God.

Instead of a culture of compassion and solidarity, we have a celebrity culture that wages an undeclared war against the truth. In an unjust world, justice is hard work and requires perpetual vigilance. The problem today is that many good people have become distracted and apathetic. After all,

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<sup>63</sup> Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, translated by R.M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), 156.

<sup>64</sup> Alison, *Living in the End Times: The Last Things Re-Imagined* (London: SPCK, 1997), 68.

why should we care about social injustice when we have much more important things to worry about, such as whom to vote for in the latest round of X-Factor, Pop Idol or Celebrity Big Brother? Why should we care about poverty when we need to attend to far more pressing issues, such as checking our Facebook profiles for the thirtieth time in a single day? And why do we need to bother ourselves with global poverty and disease when there are much more critical demands on our time, such as needing to find out about how celebrity X ended up in bed with celebrity Y?

We, including Christians, are preoccupied with the latest gadgets and gossip, which have distracted us from the plight of other people, particularly those in desperate situations. Many Christians have become too enmired in a swamp of religious practices and materialistic preoccupations to be concerned about the plight of the world. So, I think we can say that we are experiencing a crisis of compassion in contemporary culture and that the retreat of Christians into religious clubs has played its role in fomenting the crisis. The failure of Christians to salt the wider world with gospel values of truth and compassion has even lent some credence to Berdyaev's provocative statement that 'the unbelieving humanist has given a better expression of Christianity than the believing Christians who have done nothing for the improvement of society.'<sup>65</sup>

The erosion of spiritual values leads to a descent into a hostile social context which is characterized by a chronic deficit of compassion, solidarity and even basic courtesy. Without the necessary foundation of compassion, society degenerates into what Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) called a 'state of nature' in which, according to the proverb, *homo homini lupus est* – 'a man is a wolf to another man.'<sup>66</sup> Theology needs to be able to speak into this crisis, but will never be able to do so as long as the best and most original Christian minds today are distracted by pointless disputes concerning the meaning of church sacraments, apostolic succession or the

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<sup>65</sup> Berdyaev, *Russkaya Ideya* (Moscow: Astrel, 2002), 105–6.

<sup>66</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 70; see also Christian Gottlieb, *Dilemmas of Reaction in Leninist Russia: The Christian Response to the Revolution in the Works of N.A. Berdyaev, 1917–1924* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2003), 175.

latest take on the Chalcedonian formula or the eternal pre-existence of the Second Hypostasis. Instead, theology should address the urgent issues in the public sphere. In order to promote a social context in which justice and peace can thrive, Christians are called to embody and inculcate humane virtues in society, so that degenerate forces of inhumanity and callous indifference to the suffering of others will not be able to flourish.

### **Prophecy and Christian Formation**

Concerning the issue of theological formation, the question may be stated in the following way: 'how can Christians be more proactive in pervading (or 'salting') the social sphere with the gospel values of dignity, respect, truth, freedom, solidarity and compassion?' One of the lessons of church history is that the de-Christianization of society leads inexorably to the dehumanization of society. Writing before just before the outbreak of the Second World War, Berdyaev warned about the forces of 'depersonalization and dehumanization now menacing the world.'<sup>67</sup> He foresaw 'not only the de-Christianization but also the de-humanization of man, which were gathering momentum.'<sup>68</sup> He thus made the prescient remark that, 'The new Christianity must re-humanize humankind and society, culture and the world.'<sup>69</sup> This is a succinct statement of the task of theology in post-Christendom.

Theology is called to envision 'a new kind of Christianity'<sup>70</sup> that connects meaningfully to an emerging generation of spiritual seekers, who are moved not by the propositional postulates of dogmatic theology, but by the spiritual reality of lived experience and transformed humanity. As Harvey Cox put it, 'The experience of the divine is displacing theories *about* it.'<sup>71</sup> Moreover, this kind of Christianity does not reject or condemn the

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<sup>67</sup> Berdyaev, quoted in Georg Nicolaus, *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev, Individuation and the Person: A Critical Comparison* (London: Routledge, 2011), 23.

<sup>68</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 290.

<sup>69</sup> Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, translated by D. A. Lowrie (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1961), 129.

<sup>70</sup> Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011).

<sup>71</sup> Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 20.

world, but demonstrates its solidarity with people in the world, particularly those who are suffering – whether from sin, illness, personal shortcomings or injustice. In other words, the flourishing of this kind of Christianity is expressed not in the triumph of Christianity over society, but in compassion for and involvement in society.<sup>72</sup>

In order for this new kind of Christianity to come into being, there needs to be a fundamental restructuring of theological education, so that every aspect of the teaching and learning process is directed towards forming students into mature followers of Jesus who can respond appropriately to the post-Christendom context. The answer is not to be sought in any institution, be it the university or the church. Institutionalized expressions of Christian faith are becoming increasingly marginalized. Organized forms of Christianity are declining. In the UK alone, hundreds of church buildings have been sold off and converted into carpet warehouses, apartment blocks, mosques, New Age centers, or even nightclubs. The hierarchical structures of crumbling church institutions and educational establishments are becoming more defective and even dysfunctional in contemporary post-Christendom. Given the increasing irrelevance of churches, theological educators will need to think creatively about how to form students in ways that are not too dependent on church structures.

Post-Christendom and the broader tendencies of post-modernity require a holistic and integrated vision of theological formation that extends far beyond seminaries and church buildings. Theology facilitates a way of being or a mode of apprehension through which to navigate the course of faith through all the specialized forms of life in a post-modern and post-Christian era. Prophets are formed when people are brought to such a level of existential awareness that they are able to make informed valuations concerning truth, goodness and beauty. Nurturing such an awareness is crucial to forming people spiritually into the likeness of Christ.

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<sup>72</sup> Searle and Cherenkov, *Future and a Hope*, 116.

## **Spiritual Formation as a Comprehensive Process of Transformation**

Pedagogical wisdom begins with the recognition that all education – in so far as it shapes the formation of character and personality – is a spiritual process. ‘In the very act of educating’, notes Parker Palmer, ‘we are in the process of forming or deforming the human soul.’<sup>73</sup> Moreover, spiritual formation is a universal human experience. As the wise Christian philosopher, Dallas Willard, used to remark, everyone from a compassionate saint, such as Mother Teresa to a murderous egomaniac like Adolf Hitler has undergone a process of spiritual formation.<sup>74</sup> ‘Spiritual formation’ comes in many shapes and sizes and can happen at home in front of a television screen or a games console just as readily as in a church building when people are praying. One of the many failures of Christendom was the unthinking tendency of many Christians to exaggerate the role of church, particularly church activities, in the process of spiritual formation. By thinking about spiritual formation in terms of fidelity to church teaching, Christians who operated under Christendom assumptions tended to downplay the ways in which formation occurs in subtle ways in the midst of ordinary life.

Furthermore, Christendom tended to subordinate spirituality to doctrine, which lead to an impoverished understanding of formation which, as Smith claims, ‘fails to honor the fact that we are embodied, material, fundamentally desiring animals who are, whether we recognize it or not (and perhaps most when we don’t recognize it), every day being formed by the material liturgies that are forming us every day.’<sup>75</sup> If the church is forming our doctrines, but the world is forming our desires then the world has the most important part of us: ‘For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also’ (Matt. 6:21). When Jesus speaks about ‘treasure’ in this instance, he has in mind the desires of the heart. This insight lies behind

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<sup>73</sup> Palmer, ‘Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education’, in D. V. Henry and Bob R. Agee (eds.), *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 75.

<sup>74</sup> For a fascinating, yet disturbing, account of Hitler’s ‘spiritual formation’, see the first volume of Ian Kershaw’s definitive biography: *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 33.

Smith's commendable call for theological education to be reenvisioned in terms of a 'pedagogy of desire.'<sup>76</sup> Within post-Christendom there is a necessary exposure of the fallacy of assuming that spiritual growth into Christlikeness will simply happen, provided that people attend enough church services, sing enough hymns, listen to enough sermons or say enough prayers.

This is clearly an ungrounded assumption. There is nothing passive about spiritual formation. Formation within the Kingdom of God occurs not through passive waiting, but through active preparation for its coming and realization. Spiritual formation, or growth in Christlikeness, is attainable only by responding actively to the initiatives of divine grace. Such a response is made by applying the 'vision, intention and means', which are necessary to make such a transformation possible.<sup>77</sup> This is because the default mode of contemporary culture is fundamentally in conflict with the moral and spiritual values of the Kingdom of God.

The *Zeitgeist* of the world is diametrically opposed to the Holy Spirit and to the gospel. The world is in the grip of dynamic forces, many of which are demonic in origin (Eph. 6:12; cf. 1 Jn 4:3; 5:19). Even among Christians, spiritual formation is something that happens not primarily during church services, but in the midst of ordinary life. For instance, if a Christian spends three or four hours per day watching television or playing computer games and then spends fifteen minutes reading their Bible, it is obvious that the hours they spent in front of the screen will have a far greater influence on the formation of their spirit.

Christians are therefore living in a disciple-making culture. Our culture tries to form us in other ways that do not correspond to the way of Jesus. Culture is no blank canvass or neutral space, but is shaped by powerful elemental impulses and spiritual forces, the 'principalities and powers' (Eph. 6:12) that incarnate themselves in the institutions of politics,

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<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 24–5.

<sup>77</sup> Dallas Willard, 'Living A Transformed Life Adequate To Our Calling'. Available online: <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=119>

society and the media.<sup>78</sup> The media works through powerful, mind-forming selectivity in order to colonize the consciousness in ways that lead to impulsive behavior. The culture of marketing and advertising orchestrate well-aimed campaigns that are carefully devised to appeal to the zoological impulses of the human psyche. The modern advertising industry wants us not only to buy certain products, but also to *buy into* media-fabricated identities and lifestyles. These identities confer a sense of belonging and offer people a justification for continuing with their bland, workaday lifestyles that do not glow with the *anima* of spiritual vitality or depth. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) lamented the dehumanizing tendencies of mass culture in which ‘everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known . . . Everything secret loses its force.’<sup>79</sup>

As a result, many people have lost the capacity to appreciate beauty or to express themselves creatively. George Steiner decries what he calls the ‘commercialization of the aesthetic’, noting reproachfully that citations from Shakespeare and Kant have been used to sell soap powder.<sup>80</sup> Within a consumer culture, most people have only a worm’s eye view of the world and the injunction to ‘seek those things which are above’ (Col. 3:1-2) is nullified. Consequently, expressions of spiritual creativity are replaced by the trite imitations of fashion and chaotic banality of market trends and patterns of consumer consumption.

In a post-Christian consumer culture people’s minds are being formed into the image of a consumerism, which one Christian sociologist referred to as the ‘chief rival to God in our culture.’<sup>81</sup> Omnivorous consumerism permeates not merely the selling and purchase of consumable goods, but

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<sup>78</sup> Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984); Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986); Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>79</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 164–5.

<sup>80</sup> Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 34.

<sup>81</sup> Alan Storkey, ‘Post-Modernism Is Consumption’, in Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (eds.), *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 100-17.

also inter-personal relationships, which leads to the progressive dehumanization of social relations.<sup>82</sup> People begin to treat friends, work colleagues, family members and even partners like consumable gadgets – i.e. as ‘things’ to be disposed of as soon as the more efficient, more attractive replacement appears.<sup>83</sup> Within consumer culture the ‘herd instinct’<sup>84</sup> lures people into finding happiness in the commodities produced by mass culture.

Therefore, instead of thinking and engaging critically with the world, people just show up, behave themselves, obey fashion and follow the fickle tendencies of ‘public opinion’. Almost unwittingly, people capitulate to what German sociologists refer to as the ‘pressure to conform to the prevailing mass society’<sup>85</sup> and slip into ready-made roles and routines. Like the prisoners in Plato’s cave<sup>86</sup> people confine themselves within the conditions of our incarceration and even begin to admire the beauty of their prison walls. The security of routine and dead repetition is preferred to the vulnerability of freedom and responsibility. Thus, as James K. A. Smith, rightly maintains, ‘An important part of revisioning Christian education is to see it as a mode of counter-formation.’<sup>87</sup> Noxious forces such as celebrity culture and consumerism must be resisted because, as Berdyaev truthfully maintains, ‘the religion of Christ is incompatible with the recognition of bourgeois values, with reverence towards wealth, power, fame and the enjoyment of the world.’<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Karl Marx describes these processes in meticulous detail in the famous first chapter of his major work, *Das Kapital*. In the final part of the first chapter he uses the term ‘commodity fetishism’ (*Warenfetisch*) to describe the dehumanization of human relations within capitalist societies in which social relations among people degenerate into purely economic relations based on market principles. See chapter 1 of Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1*, translated by B. Fowkes (London: Penguin, 2004).

<sup>83</sup> David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>84</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, translated by D. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>85</sup> Stefan Blankertz, *Die Katastrophe der Befreiung: Faschismus und Demokratie* (Berlin: BoD, 2015), 237.

<sup>86</sup> See Book VII of Plato’s *Republic* in Plato, *Six Great Dialogues: Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus, Symposium*, translated by B. Jowett (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 360–63.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 33.

<sup>88</sup> Berdyaev, *Smysl Tvorchestva*, 260.

It has been observed that we are living in very harsh and vulgar times.<sup>89</sup> The recent history of mass culture sometimes reads like an unhappy chronicle of the decay of spiritual values. Grotesque indecency is paraded and packaged by the culture industry and sold to millions of consumers as entertainment. Insensitivity, meaninglessness and a prevailing sense of nihilism have rendered people indifferent to human suffering. In the words of two leading sociologists, we are witnessing 'unparalleled displays of human insensitivity.'<sup>90</sup> Society is stuffed with useless, valueless information about the most banal superficialities, which denote the tedious triviality and emptiness of mass culture and fabricated moral sentiment. Under the constant assault of mind-numbing propaganda, people lose their capacity to wonder. Spontaneity and creativity are submerged under the dead forces of repetition and routine. As Dostoevsky put it, 'The world is spiritual, but the higher part of human existence is rejected completely and scorned with a sense of triumph, even with hatred.'<sup>91</sup>

In a culture that exhibits a 'supreme disdain for the things of the soul',<sup>92</sup> the world is emptied of beauty and depth and becomes flat, dull, tedious, predictable and repetitive. The dominance of secular materialism has ensured that people's souls have been 'soaked with secularity.'<sup>93</sup> Under the dead weight of commercial and bureaucratic interests, society starts to take on the features of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control that characterize fast food restaurants.<sup>94</sup> The culture industry, the advertising agencies and the mass media serve as continual distractions that divert people's thoughts away from the deep issues of life and towards the insipid prattle, for example, of soap operas and celebrity gossip.

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<sup>89</sup> Leading sociologists, Bauman and Donskis refer to the present 'age of modern barbarism.' See Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 139.

<sup>90</sup> Bauman and Donskis, *Moral Blindness*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Dostoevsky, *Bratya Karamazovy* (Moscow: Bertelsmann Media, 2011), 290.

<sup>92</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, translated by D. Attwater (New York: Semantron Press, 2009), 78

<sup>93</sup> Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 103.

<sup>94</sup> George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: 20th Anniversary Edition* (London: SAGE, 2013).

Even more insidious distractions can be found in the film, tabloid and magazine industries in which degraded conceptions of sex and violence and the lust for power are all found to prevail. Moreover, the language found on the Internet is often sadistic. The powers and principalities are at work in the shadowlands of the cybersphere. The anarchy and lawlessness that characterize the unregulated Internet environment might even be said to correspond with the primeval chaos of the nothingness (the 'formless void') in the biblical creation narratives, which some theologians following Karl Barth, have characterized as the essence of the demonic. Online abuse has spiraled out of control as 'verbal orgies of faceless hatred'<sup>95</sup> are unleashed by anonymous trolls against total strangers.

The addictive aspects of Internet consumption, together with the constant repetition of degrading and inhumane themes on social media, television, the advertising industry and in video games, is harmful in so far as people's inner minds begin to be subtly conformed to the superficial and vulgar material that becomes embedded in our subconscious. Given the alarming proliferation of online pornographic material, it is possible that overall in many parts of today's post-Christendom society, pornography is having a greater shaping power on people's spiritual formation than the gospel. The constant stream of violence, abuse and sexual perversion trains the mind in destructive thought patterns, thereby impoverishing life and diminishing relationships.

These regrettable tendencies are all symptomatic of an underlying spiritual crisis resulting from humankind's estrangement from God. They testify to the decadence of the world and the process of dehumanization that is occurring in a fallen world buffeted by cruelty and conflict. These trends indicate the desolation of a sinsick humanity that has forsaken God and, in its turn, seems to have been forsaken by God. The world in a post-

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<sup>95</sup> Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 11.

Christian era continues 'as though there had been no redemption and that no anticipatory sign of resurrection had been given.'<sup>96</sup>

Such is the seeming absence of resurrection power from the world that the content of modern life in its alienation from God can even be understood as a 'negative revelation'<sup>97</sup> of the Christian truth. As Jon Sobrino maintains, the world is 'sin, radical negativity, a radical negation of the will of God, and the highest manifestation of the rejection of God.'<sup>98</sup> All the baneful developments in the world today – from Internet pornography to injustice, fascism, racism, exploitation, poverty and the degradation of the environment – are derived from a common spiritual source: namely, from sin.

### **Two Prophetic Witnesses for a Post-Christian World: Nikolai Berdyaev and Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

As theology in a post-Christian world seeks to discover its prophetic voice, there are, in my view, two outstanding representatives of the prophetic Christian tradition from whom Christians can learn vital lessons concerning the nature and task of theology today. These are the gifted Russian Christian mystic and free-thinker, Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), and the courageous German pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945).

What marks these two figures out is the way that they saw beyond the superficial events of their times and perceived the raging abyss that was surging beneath the surface of world history. They were endowed with rare and acute powers of spiritual perception that were the fruit of much prayer and suffering. They were so far ahead of their times that, although they were born in 1874 and 1906 respectively, the visions of Christianity set forth by Berdyaev and Bonhoeffer are, arguably, only now coming of age. The philosopher, Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), once remarked that, 'It

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<sup>96</sup> Boff, *Christianity in a Nutshell* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 87.

<sup>97</sup> The term, 'negative revelation' of God's truth is taken from the writings of the Russian mystic philosopher, Vladimir Solovyev. See P. P. Gajdenko, *Vladimir Solovyev i Filosofiya Serebryanogo Veka* (Moscow: Progress, 2001), 60.

<sup>98</sup> Sobrino, quoted in Paul G. Crowley, 'Theology in the Light of Human Suffering: A Note on Taking the Crucified Down from the Cross', in Pope (ed.), *Hope and Solidarity*, 19.

is one of the marks of writers of genius that what they say may, at times, touch a central nerve in the minds or feelings of men who belong to other times, cultures or outlooks, and set up trains of thought and entail consequences which did not, or could not, occur to such writers, still less occupy their minds.<sup>99</sup> Although Berlin had in mind the Neapolitan philosopher, Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), the same could also apply to both Berdyaev and Bonhoeffer.

For many years now I have had a small framed portrait of Nikolai Berdyaev on my study desk. I regard him as one of the greatest prophets of the twentieth century. His Russian prose is lucid and the profundity of his spiritual insight, which was nurtured by his deep immersion in the biblical vision of salvation, is immense. He has influenced my spiritual outlook more than any other philosopher or theologian I have encountered. Already in his early teens, Berdyaev was fluent in several European languages and deeply acquainted with the works of leading figures in Russian and European philosophy. He was steeped in patristic writings of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers and well-versed in the classical and mystical traditions of Christian theology.<sup>100</sup>

Despite his formidable learning and the exceptional subtlety of his mind, Berdyaev was no ivory-tower academic. He asserted that, 'in my case the desire to know the world has always been accompanied by a desire to alter it . . . I was never a philosopher of the academic type, and it has never been my wish that philosophy should be abstract and remote from life.'<sup>101</sup> Berdyaev's greatness consists in his prophetic foresight and spiritual depth that enabled him to expose the falsehood of the pseudo-religions of fascism and communism that were in the ascendancy at the time he wrote his prophetic works.

Berdyaev knew what it meant to 'suffer for righteousness' sake' (1 Pet. 3:14). At the age of twenty-five he was exiled to northern Russia and

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<sup>99</sup> Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 151.

<sup>100</sup> Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev*, 12.

<sup>101</sup> Berdyaev, quoted in Seaver, *Nicolas Berdyaev*, 11–12.

in 1913 he was charged with blasphemy for an article in which he had criticized the clerical abuses of the Russian Orthodox Church. As a Christian freethinker and a dedicated defender of liberty,<sup>102</sup> Berdyaev was imprisoned twice by the Bolshevik regime and was forced into exile by the Bolsheviks in 1922. At the height of Lenin's Red Terror (1918–1922), Berdyaev was interrogated by the Head of Lenin's secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky (1877–1926). Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), in his celebrated book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, describes Berdyaev's encounter with Lenin's interrogators in terms that illustrate Berdyaev's prophetic credentials as one who was unafraid to speak truth to power:

They wanted to drag him [Berdyaev] into an open trial; they arrested him twice; and (in 1922) he was subjected to a night interrogation by Dzerzhinsky himself . . . But Berdyaev did not humiliate himself. He did not beg or plead. He set forth firmly those religious and moral principles which had led him to refuse to accept the political authority established in Russia. And not only did they come to the conclusion that he would be useless for a trial, but they liberated him.<sup>103</sup>

After his exile from the Soviet Union and his resettlement in Paris, Berdyaev was uniquely placed to understand the pathological tendencies of the emerging totalitarian ideology that had descended upon Europe in the early part of the twentieth century. In a new age of tribalism and the spread of racist ideologies, Berdyaev had the foresight to understand that, 'Racism is anti-human and anti-Christian. It is founded solely upon the principle of biological heredity which is highly dubious from a biological point of view. It is an extreme form of anti-personalism and regards the human being as

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<sup>102</sup> Berdyaev remarked that, 'Freedom, unconditional and uncompromising freedom, has been the fundamental fountain-head and prime mover of all my thinking' – Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 158.

<sup>103</sup> A. I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975), 130. Berdyaev himself recounts his encounter with Dzerzhinsky in his autobiographical treatise, *Samopoznanie: Opit Filozofskoi Avtobiografii* (Moscow: Mir Knigi, 2010), 278–82.

a breed of animals.<sup>104</sup> From this anti-racist perspective, Berdyaev understood that,

'Two ideas contend with each other in the world: The first idea is the selection of the strong, of the best, of the genetically-pure, of the aristocrats of blood and race; the domination of certain human beings over others. The second idea is the brotherhood of all human beings, the dignity and worth of every human personality, the acknowledgement of the spiritual foundation of personhood. According to the first idea, a human being is merely part of nature; whereas according to the second idea, the human is a spiritual being. The truly human is associated with the second idea; the first idea is inhuman.'<sup>105</sup>

Berdyaev lamented other dehumanizing forces, such as the increasing collectivization and mechanization of society. He perceived how dangerous these tendencies could become if they were to be harnessed to serve the destructive ends of degenerate ideologies, such as fascism and communism. Under these conditions, the human spirit is crushed and people 'are cast into outer darkness in which they are reduced to the semblance of broken puppets.'<sup>106</sup> Berdyaev became the most eloquent and perceptive critic of totalitarianism in both its fascist and communist manifestations. He denounced Lenin's communism as 'a vast experiment based on the denial of all absolute spiritual elements in personal and social life.'<sup>107</sup>

Berdyaev controversially and prophetically ascribed some of the blame for the catastrophe of Soviet Communism to the Christian Church's betrayal of gospel principles concerning the rejection of property and

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<sup>104</sup> Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsialnaya Dialektika*, 453.

<sup>105</sup> Berdyaev, *Ekzistentsialnaya Dialektika*, 453.

<sup>106</sup> Berdyaev, *Dream and Reality*, 170.

<sup>107</sup> Berdyaev, quoted in D. A. Lowrie, *Rebellious Prophet: A Life of Nicolai Berdyaev* (London: Gollancz, 1960), 146.

wealth and the fundamental equality of all human beings before God. He famously claimed that:

'Christians who accuse the communists of atheism and anti-religious persecution should not lay the blame exclusively on the godless communists, but they should assume part of the responsibility themselves – a significant part. They should be not only accusers and judges, but also confessors. Have Christians done anything to realize Christian justice in the life of society? Have they helped to realize fraternal relations among the people without hatred and violence with which they accuse the communists? The sins of the Christians, the sins of the historical churches have been very great and these sins bring with them a just retribution.'<sup>108</sup>

Berdyayev thus criticized the Christian churches of his day for failing to express their gospel calling to be salt and light by addressing urgent issues of social justice in the public sphere. He thus interpreted the coming of communism as God's just judgement on a sinful Russian Christendom that had prioritized its standing with the state and neglected its duty to serve the poor. If Christians had embodied the truth of communism's commitment to social justice, he insisted, communism's falsehoods would never have prevailed.<sup>109</sup>

Berdyayev lamented the failure of churches to infuse the social space with humane gospel values that would have immunized Russian and German society against the pathogens of communism and fascism respectively. Instead of prophetic resistance to the dehumanizing tendencies of his age, Berdyayev found the Christian churches, on the whole, working in collusion with authoritarian regimes to suppress anarchy and revolution. Despite the strong undercurrent of pessimism that one detects throughout his writings, Berdyayev's message was ultimately one of hope and renewal. He declared that, 'When everything seems obsolete and

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<sup>108</sup> Berdyayev, *Istoki i Smysl*, 200–1.

<sup>109</sup> Berdyayev, *Dream and Reality*, 229.

exhausted, when the earth crumbles beneath our feet as it does so in our time, when there is neither hope nor illusion, when we perceive all things uncovered and exposed – it is then that the soil is prepared for a new spiritual awakening in the world.<sup>110</sup>

Berdyayev corresponds with the description of the prophet offered at the beginning of this chapter. He was deeply antagonistic to the prevailing cultural trends that led Europe into two devastating wars that drew the whole world into their destructive capacious orbit. He even claimed that, 'Christianity is the revelation of another world, and to make it conform to this world is to betray it.'<sup>111</sup> He was distressed by how Christianity had been disfigured and compromised by powerful political ideologies and lamented that, 'Men have accommodated Christianity to this world and have greedily seized a thus accommodated Christianity in order to bolster up their role and position in the world.'<sup>112</sup> Berdyayev combined political insight with prophetic foresight. He was able to see beyond the façade of surface events and to see his times in light of eternity and to perceive God's redemptive purposes in the world. Most crucially, he understood that Christianity is not a religion of private salvation, but a summons to transform the world in the power of the resurrection. Berdyayev continues to speak prophetically into today's emerging post-Christian world.

Like Berdyayev, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prophet for his time. Moreover, like Berdyayev, Bonhoeffer was a formidable theologian, who anticipated the emergence of a new expression of Christianity and attempted to sketch an outline of a theology that would be appropriate for an emerging post-Christian world. With the passion, intensity and devotion of a prophet, Bonhoeffer initiated a revolution in theology by reminding theologians that the Christian life is not a matter of adhering to concepts or following rules, but was about lived obedience to the call of God, which expressed itself in concrete actions. The Christian life, in other words, was

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<sup>110</sup> Berdyayev, 'Novoe Srednevekovye', in Berdyayev, *Smysl Tvorchestva* (Moscow: Astrel, 2011), 626.

<sup>111</sup> Berdyayev, *Dream and Reality*, 291.

<sup>112</sup> Berdyayev, *Dream and Reality*, 63.

active, rather than reactive.<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer expressed this point particularly eloquently in a letter he sent to his friends around Christmas in 1942:

'If we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ's large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer. Mere waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. The Christian is called to sympathy and action, not in the first place by his own sufferings, but by the sufferings of his brethren, for whose sake Christ suffered.'<sup>114</sup>

What makes Bonhoeffer particularly relevant to the current study is his prophetic vision of a kind of theology that would be required in a post-religious world. Bonhoeffer saw that Christianity was no longer the dominant force in contemporary society and asked searching questions about what this new reality meant not only for academic theology, but for Christian existence in a post-Christian world. In a letter to his close friend, Eberhard Bethge (1909–2000), Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1944 that,

'What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience — and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as "religious" do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by "religious" . . . and if therefore man becomes radically religionless — and I

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<sup>113</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 446.

<sup>114</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 66–7.

think that that is already more or less the case . . . what does that mean for Christianity?’<sup>115</sup>

Bonhoeffer realized ahead of his time the demise of ‘Sunday Christianity’. He wanted to expound a vision of theology that recognized that Christ was Lord not just of religion or of church symbols and rituals, but of the whole of life. As Bonhoeffer put it, ‘Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world.’ Out of this conviction, Bonhoeffer rejected the fallacy of dividing the world into its sacred and secular dimensions. Bonhoeffer maintained that, ‘There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world. Partaking in Christ, we stand at the same time in the reality of God and in the reality of the world . . . Because this is so, the theme of two realms, which has dominated the history of the church again and again is foreign to the New Testament.’<sup>116</sup>

One of the key themes that connects the scattered fragments of Bonhoeffer’s theological writings is Christ’s solidarity with the world in its immeasurable suffering. His aim was to formulate a theology that could come to terms with what Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) called ‘the incomprehensible horror of existence.’<sup>117</sup> Such a theology, he urged, would need to dismantle the false distinctions of classical theology that had drawn strict lines of demarcation between church and world. ‘The world’, Bonhoeffer affirmed, ‘is not divided into parts between Christ and the devil, it is the holistic world of Christ, whether or not the world itself knows this.’<sup>118</sup> Therefore, ‘In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without

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<sup>115</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in Jeffrey C. Pugh, *Religionless Christianity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Troubled Times* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 85.

<sup>116</sup> John G. Stackhouse, *Making the Best of It: Following Christ in the Real World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129.

<sup>117</sup> Schweitzer, ‘The Philosophy of Civilization’, in Marvin W. Meyer, Kurt Bergel (eds.), *Reverence for Life: The Ethics of Albert Schweitzer for the Twenty-first Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 82.

<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in John D. Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 215.

the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world and when I encounter the reality of the world it is always already sustained, accepted and reconciled in the reality of God.<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, faith, urged Bonhoeffer, should be joined to every sphere of life, including politics, business and the media, as well as religion and education. Faith must not be confined to private morality or to church life, but the rule of Christ should be extended to all of life in recognition that 'the world is the Lord's and all that is therein' (Psalm 24:1).<sup>120</sup>

As well as his world-affirming vision of Christianity, Bonhoeffer's prophetic significance also consists in his radical reorientation of theology towards the suffering of God. This tendency had a long pedigree in German theology that stretched back to Martin Luther (1483–1546), who formulated a robust and influential 'theology of the cross' (*theologia crucis*), but Bonhoeffer revived this emphasis and gave it a powerful expression for the time of crisis in which he lived. Writing from his prison cell, where he was being held by the Gestapo, Bonhoeffer famously claimed that 'only a suffering God can help us now.'<sup>121</sup> To truly follow Christ meant incurring not reward, honor and success, but anxiety, solitude and obloquy.

Bonhoeffer rejected the superficial triumphalism of official Christianity in Germany in the 1930s, which he associated with the vulgar worship of success that he regarded as one of the characteristics of the evil Nazi regime. Instead, he reinstated suffering, rather than triumphalism as the essence of the Christian life. 'The cross is not random suffering, but necessary suffering', stated Bonhoeffer. 'The cross is not suffering that stems from natural existence; it is suffering that comes from being Christian . . . A Christianity that no longer took discipleship seriously remade the gospel into a solace of cheap grace.'<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, translated by N. H. Smith (London: SCM, 1995), 193.

<sup>120</sup> Searle and Cherenkov, *Future and a Hope*, 98–9.

<sup>121</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1967), 361.

<sup>122</sup> Bonhoeffer, quoted in Peter Frick, 'The Imitatio Christi of Thomas a Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in P. Frick (ed.), *Bonhoeffer's Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 43.

One of the most important legacies of Bonhoeffer's theological fragments is his categorical rejection of 'cheap grace'. Bonhoeffer defined cheap grace thus: 'the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.'<sup>123</sup>

Cheap grace, in the memorable words of Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003) meant 'creeping round the cross.'<sup>124</sup> Bonhoeffer taught that for the Christian the cross is not an object to creep around, but a burden to be taken up. Under the illusion of cheap grace, too many Christendom-minded Christians have become accustomed to regarding the cross 'not as a burden on the back, but as a decoration on the chest' – as Hans Küng puts it.<sup>125</sup> The cross of compromised Christendom clericalism has become a decorative symbol that confers status, power, and identity, whereas the cross of Christ was an instrument of torture that meant nothing but humiliation, vulnerability and estrangement. For Bonhoeffer, discipleship to the Crucified Christ was always a discipleship of suffering. The integrity and poignancy of Bonhoeffer's theology of suffering were tragically confirmed in his gruesome torture and execution by the Nazis on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945, less than a month before the end of World War Two. Despite his tragically premature and violent death, Bonhoeffer, as a Christian prophet, testified that there was a light shining in the era of great darkness and that not even this darkness could overcome the light of the gospel.

In Bonhoeffer's view, as well as impoverishing the spiritual lives of individual Christians, cheap grace had consequences that extend even beyond the key issue of personal discipleship; this kind of cheap grace also contributed to the rise of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany. Cheap grace had

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<sup>123</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. by R. H. Fuller and I. Booth (London: SCM, 1959), 36.

<sup>124</sup> Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 134.

<sup>125</sup> Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 572. Here Küng had in mind the 'pectoral cross' worn on the chest of bishops since the twelfth century and officially prescribed for Mass from 1572.

tilled the spiritual soil of the German nation, thus creating a fertile breeding ground for the ideological perversions and theological blasphemies of Nazism. By reducing Christianity to a private, pietistic religion of salvation from sin that had no necessary material connection with the believer's life, character or conduct, the vast majority of German Christians were both morally and spiritually unequipped to resist Hitler. Moreover, since most German Christians had no tradition of thinking theologically or biblically about political events, many were persuaded not merely to accept Hitler's rise to power as 'the will of God', but some were prepared even to support the Nazi dictator. Although genocide was an integral part of Nazi ideology, these Christians supported Hitler because he had promised to restore law and order and traditional family values after the chaos and perceived decadence of Weimar Germany.

Unfortunately, many churches in Germany and throughout Christendom have continued to live according to the principles of 'cheap grace'. For example, in 1988 the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany issued the following statement: The church is not 'an ideal society, nor are Christians described as better people. Rather, the nature of the church consists in men and women hearing the word of Jesus Christ and as sinners appropriating salvation in proclamation and in the sacraments and handing it on.'<sup>126</sup> This is as pure an expression of what Bonhoeffer had in mind when he spoke about cheap grace as one will find. The problem with this understanding of faith, as Bonhoeffer well understood, was that it separates salvation from life and reduces the gospel communication of the newness and transfiguration of life into an insipid message concerning the forgiveness of sins.

The rupture between life and salvation, between faith and obedience, created by 'cheap grace', leads to the enfeeblement of the church's prophetic witness to the world. Like the church in Bonhoeffer's time, the response of the Christendom Church to salient issues that emerge from the

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<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Sölle, *Thinking about God*, 147.

public sphere has often been devoid of a theological basis<sup>127</sup> and has sometimes directly contradicted fundamental biblical-theological principles.<sup>128</sup> Prophets are thus needed in the church today in order to expose the hypocrisy of traditional family values, which upon closer reflection, turn out to be disturbingly anti-Christian.<sup>129</sup> Authoritarian regimes from Hitler's Germany to Putin's Russia offer examples of how Satan can cloak himself in the garb of traditional family values.<sup>130</sup> Tragically, we can also see many examples of how some Christians can be seduced by a 'strong delusion' (2 Thess. 2:11) into supporting fascist political parties because they pursue their dehumanizing agendas under the banner of the promotion of traditional values.

Therefore, both Bonhoeffer and Berdyaev, each in his own way, cause Christians today to ask themselves some difficult questions, such as, is it even possible to live the Christian life if the entire structure of society requires us to compromise our Christian principles of honesty, openness, integrity and compassion? If the society is corrupt and if our public institutions are contributing to the dehumanization of society, what can Christians do to address these anti-gospel tendencies? If we lack the moral courage to take upon ourselves the legal responsibility for the government and the situation in our country, then why do we wonder at the immorality of society and the nihilism of ordinary people? If the Christian Church is not in solidarity with the people, then why should the people be in solidarity with the Church? Who needs us if we have nothing to offer? Who will look out for us if we are not willing to be our brother's keeper?

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<sup>127</sup> Searle and Cherenkov, *Future and a Hope*, 2.

<sup>128</sup> This is seen, for instance, in the pseudo-theology and anti-Christian hysteria exhibited by some Christians in the UK who supported Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, as well as in the overwhelming support of many American evangelical Christians for Donald Trump's campaign to become President of the United States of America.

<sup>129</sup> Bonhoeffer's critique of conventional, nominal Christianity has invited illuminating comparisons with Kierkegaard. See, for example, Matthew Kirkpatrick, *Attacks on Christendom in a World Come of Age: Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer, and the Question of "Religionless Christianity"* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011).

<sup>130</sup> Bonhoeffer denounced the Nazi emphasis on such 'traditional values', expressed in the slogan, *Kinder-Küche-Kirche* (Children-Kitchen-Church). See Larry Rasmussen, 'The Ethics of Responsible Action', in John W de Gruchy (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 211.

## **Creating a Curriculum for Prophets**

Berdyaev and Bonhoeffer, in common with several other prophets of recent times, have done the great service of making visible to us the urgent spiritual issues with which Christians today must engage. A curriculum in theology today should therefore leave plenty of space to introduce students to the lives and writings of the prophets, because none of the spiritual challenges posed by a post-Christian society can be addressed in any depth by theological graduates who have only been taught how to conjugate Greek verbs, or who have spent their productive study hours in acquainting themselves with the theory of Real Presence in the so-called Eucharist.

In a Bible college or university, theology students may discover, for instance, that the first five books of the Bible were probably not written by a single author or that Arius disputed with Athanasius concerning the consubstantiation of God the Father and God the Son, but these discoveries will hardly equip students to be change agents of the Kingdom of God once they have finished their studies. If graduates of theological seminaries can discourse at length upon nuances of Trinitarian theology, but have nothing to say about relationships, popular culture, the human costs of a post-Christian society and the spiritual implications of living through a 'crisis of compassion', then how do they expect to engage with the world in a meaningful way?

Courses in biblical studies and systematic theology are often laden with Christendom assumptions and are geared towards the training of pastor-teachers; it is doubtful that they contribute to the formation of missional disciples. Such courses are not conducive to the creation of genuinely prophetic figures among the Christian community. In fact, some church and seminar institutions have become so moribund that if a prophetic figure were to emerge, they would probably do so either outside of the church or at least from its margins, often in opposition to the established church as was the case with other prophetic figures in Christian history from Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther King Jr.

Christendom could produce effective church planters and even charismatic evangelists, but it was incapable of forming prophets. Christendom represented the exhaustion of Western culture's creative powers, the enfeeblement of the human spirit and the captivity of a dynamic and world-transforming faith within institutional structures. Such a context was not conducive to the formation of those imbued with a prophetic vocation. In post-Christendom, students must be trained to resist the insipid conformity to cultural norms, which is demanded by Christendom churches and the wider society. Theology has been trapped in an iron cage of bureaucracy and smothered under the dreary ferment of performance targets, assessment criteria and regimes of quality control. Funding targets are met, boxes are ticked and arbitrary enhancement criteria are fulfilled, but creative scholars are side-lined and treated as little more than walking CVs, whose publications that can be cannibalized to bolster the department's next submission to the Research Excellence Framework.

Academic freedom and scholarly creativity are undermined by the incessant need to fulfil the metrics of impact and productivity in order to generate funding. 'What has happened', explains Leonidas Donskis, 'is a revolution of bureaucrats speaking in the name of freedom and competition but each day tearing these values down.'<sup>131</sup> Whereas universities were once widely recognized as citadels of culture, many have been pressured by market forces into offering what some commentators have referred to as the pedagogical equivalent of fast food.<sup>132</sup> The market pressures on the university sector have increased to such an extent that there is now serious doubt concerning whether or not universities will even survive the current century as recognizable scholarly communities that promote the virtues of truth, critical inquiry and creativity.<sup>133</sup> What is needed is a new vision of transformative knowledge that is 'attuned to basic principles of social

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<sup>131</sup> Donskis and Bauman, *Moral Blindness*, 136.

<sup>132</sup> This process has been referred to as 'the McDonaldization of Higher Education'. See the book of this title, edited by Dennis Hayes, Robin Wynyard, published in 2002.

<sup>133</sup> Donskis and Bauman, *Moral Blindness*, 135.

justice, the respect for human decency and diversity, the rejection of false universalisms; the affirmation of the positivity of difference; the principles of academic freedom, antiracism, openness to others and conviviality.<sup>134</sup>

In post-Christendom the demand is surfacing for new reformers, for committed innovators and principled leaders who can combine Christlike humility with a bold prophetic mandate. The time has come for courageous, yet responsible, prophetic leaders who are willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel. Like orchids that can grow in a desert, in a greenhouse or in a nature reserve, leaders do not all emerge from the same source. This is why one must know not only the church, but also the related spheres that can produce Christian leaders.

Post-Christendom transfers the center of gravity of Christian faith from the center of society to its periphery and thus enables a proper connection between prophetic vocation and theological formation. Insipid curricula overloaded with modules on doctrine and liturgy do not contribute to the formation of missional disciples in a post-Christendom culture; rather they stifle creativity by producing religious functionaries who can perpetuate the system and the *status quo*. Instead of acquainting students with historical and doctrinal minutiae, theological education should be thought of as a creative task that leads students to perceive the depth, meaning and character of life in all its mystery and abundance. If theology can be envisioned in these terms, one of the benefits that may accrue would be the respect and recognition of the wider academic community that theology has something meaningful to contribute to discussions concerning the future of the earth and the welfare and flourishing of its inhabitants.

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<sup>134</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 11.