

post-Christendom

The emergence of a network and consumer society coincides with the demise of Christendom.

What is taking place is not merely the continued decline of organized Christianity, but the death of the culture that formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people as a whole. If a core identity survives for Britons, it is certainly no longer Christian. The culture of Christianity has gone in the Britain of the new millennium.¹

Much of Britain's self-understanding comes from centuries of Christian faith, but many in Britain now have minimal knowledge of the Christian faith. The Christian story is no longer at the heart of the nation. Although people may identify themselves as 'Christian' in the national census, for the majority that does not involve belonging to a worshipping community, or any inclination that it should. Many people have no identifiable religious interest or expression. Among some young people there is little evidence of any belief in a transcendent dimension. During the twentieth century Sunday school attendance dropped from 55 per cent to 4 per cent of children, meaning that even the rudiments of the Christian story and of Christian experience are lacking in most young people. Our multicultural and multifaith society reinforces a consumerist view that faiths and their differences are simply issues of personal choice, to be decided on the basis of what 'works' or makes you happy.

The consequences for a national church, used to operating among people and institutions on the assumptions of Christendom, are acute. The Church of England bases a significant part of its identity on its physical presence in every community, and on a 'come to us' strategy. But as community becomes more complex, mere geographical presence is no longer a guarantee that we can connect. The reality is that mainstream culture no longer brings people to the church door. We can no longer assume that we can automatically reproduce ourselves, because the pool of people who regard church as relevant or important is decreasing with every generation.

The Church has got to realize its missionary responsibilities. We live in a society, whether that be urban or rural, which is now basically second or even third generation pagan once again; and we cannot simply work on the premise that all we have to do to bring people to Christ is to ask them to remember their long-held, but dormant faith. Very many people have no residue of Christian faith at all; it's not just dormant, it's nonexistent; in so many instances we have to go back to basics; we are in a critical missionary situation.²

This report believes that the beginnings, in the last 20 years, of church plants and fresh expressions of church represent the emergence of a diametrically different approach that is both theologically appropriate and strategically significant. Instead of 'come to us', this new approach is to 'go to them'. We need to find expressions of church that communicate with post-Christian people, and which enable them to become committed communities of followers of Jesus Christ. Then they, in turn, can continue to engage in mission with and beyond their own culture.

¹ Callum Brown, 2000

² Bishop of Whitby, 1998