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The Christian World

The nineteenth century truly was 'the Christian age', not just for Europe but for the rest of the world too. Christianity determined not only its churches but its 'world' as well, in public life, in politics and in culture. We call this worldwide complex 'Christianity', 'Christendom', '*cristianidad*', meaning by that not just 'the essence of Christianity', as we might also talk about the essence of Judaism or Buddhism in whatever cultural form they may take, but the form it takes in the world.

In the nineteenth century the Christian nations of Europe became great powers on a worldwide scale. For these nations, this century became the age of progress and expansion. Continually new scientific discoveries and technical inventions brought them a tremendous growth in power: from the locomotive to the motor car, from the sailing ship to the steamship, from the telegraph to the telephone, from classical physics to the relativity theory, and so forth. 'Knowledge is power', Francis Bacon had proclaimed at the beginning of modern times. The immense progress in knowledge during the nineteenth century gave the European nations the increased power with which they believed they could advance to universal domination. By means of education, from the primary school to the university, a nation's own people, and then the peoples of the world as well, could be led out of the night of superstition into the light of reason.

The Christian nations in Europe conquered their colonial empires in Africa and Asia and spread Europe's 'Christian civilization' with messianic missionary zeal. They all participated: Holland in Indonesia, Belgium in the Congo, Italy in Libya and Eritrea, and finally Germany too, in East Africa and 'the German Southwest' [Namibia]. The rest already belonged to the British Empire, which stretched from Calcutta to Cape Town and Cairo, as Cecil Rhodes boasted. In the United States, the transcontinental railroad carried settlers west; in Russia the Trans-Siberian Railway took the Cossacks as far as Vladivostock. By 1900 the time was not far off when the great Christian powers would carve up China too among themselves. Little was needed for the whole inhabited globe to become Christian.

Even then there was already an unspoken ecumenical community among the national Christian religions in Europe. We can see this from the domed buildings of the national churches, which followed the model of the Hagia Sophia in Byzantium and St Peter's in Rome: St Paul's in London, St Isaac's Cathedral in St Petersburg, the Sacré Coeur in Paris, and the Berlin Cathedral in Prussian Germany.

It is no wonder that these expansions of European Christianity into the world of the nations conduced to messianic notions about Christianity's end-time domination of the world, nor was it surprising that the unheard-of progress in science and technology should have led to a limitless secular faith in progress.

We call messianic notions about Christian lordship over the world *chiliastic* or *millenarian* if they use the image of 'the Thousand Years' Empire' in which, according to Revelation 20, Christ and those who are his will rule the world and judge the nations. We call them *messianic* if they already determine and enthuse the present here and now.¹

These millenarian visions go back to 'the image of the monarchies' in Daniel 7, which counts as an early theopolitical picture of world history. The four bestial empires rise up one after another

out of the sea of chaos, each being destroyed by the next. The last of them is the Roman Empire. But then God will send from heaven on to earth the humane kingdom of the Son of Man: 'His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed' (7.14). 'And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; and their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom' (7.27). Although according to Daniel this divine kingdom of the Son of Man is an alternative to the violent empires of chaos in history, in the early political theology of Byzantium and later in Spain, it was held to be 'the fifth world empire' and put on a level with the others.² As heir to the preceding world empires of the Persians, Greeks and Romans, 'the Christian universal monarchy' is supposed to complete world history and will finally be victorious in the struggle for world domination. All the other empires will be annihilated by the 'stone of Daniel' (Dan. 2), or 'the fire of Daniel' (Dan. 7), until in the end all the nations will be 'one flock under one shepherd'. After the victorious struggle against the Moors, it was with this political theology that the Spanish court theologians justified the conquest of the Aztec, Mayan and Inca kingdoms in Latin America. That was the so-called messianism of the Iberian cultures.³

This was also 'the new world order' with which history and its conflicts were to be consummated in a universal empire of eternal peace. *Novus ordo saeculorum* is impressed on the seal of the United States and on every one-dollar note. This messianic solemnity is still inherent in the political culture of the United States today.⁴ Every president invokes anew his messianic destiny for the world.

In the 'old world' of Europe, the emotional fervour of 'modern times' took over the corresponding messianic role in firing the sense of superiority and the will to bring history to its completion. The transition from the conflicts and crises of history into the perfected state of eternal peace was dated 'now' by the prophets

of modernity such as Lessing and Kant, Hegel and Marx: what had once been merely awaited could now be realized. After the ancient world and the Middle Ages, modern times are now beginning. That is the end time. The end of history is now almost within our grasp, and it will be our era, 'the Christian era'. After the age of revolutions, the age of evolution is now beginning, and its progress will have no end. The kingdom of God is coming so close to us in the kingdom of Christ that without any apocalyptic catastrophes it can now already be made the greatest good of morality and the highest goal of cultural developments in all spheres of life. That is the moral and teleological form of the kingdom of God taught by liberal Protestantism from Immanuel Kant to Albrecht Ritschl.⁵

Throughout the whole era, the educated classes in Europe and New England cherished the dream of the moral improvement of humanity. My grandfather was the headmaster of a private school and the grand master of a Freemasons' Lodge in Hamburg. On his gravestone stands instead of some comforting verse from the Bible, Lessing's hopeful sentence from his essay 'On the Education of the Human Race' (1777, § 88): 'It will come, it will surely come, the time of perfecting, when man . . . will do the right just because it is the right.' But neither he nor most of the educated people of his time realized that this moral optimism had an ancient apocalyptic presupposition: that the good can only spread unhindered because in the 'Thousand Years' Empire 'Satan has been bound for a thousand years' (Rev. 20.2-4). For Christendom, Lessing and Kant had already proclaimed the 'transition from the historical faith of the church to the general faith in reason', a transition which was supposed to begin *now*, with the general Enlightenment.

For inward reasons of faith and for external sociological ones, Protestantism was the first of the Christian confessions in western Europe and the United States to enter into the modern world. For many people liberal Protestantism became the convincing cultural form of Christianity. After the old Byzantine symbiosis of throne and altar, after the feudal and monarchist symbiosis of

hierarchy and class society, among the progressive middle classes of the nineteenth century a new unity developed between personal belief and modern culture, a unity which Friedrich Schleiermacher insistently invoked in his introductory letters to Lücke.⁶ Modern university foundations with theological faculties at their head, and private universities in the United States with divinity schools in their forefront, were directed towards the evangelization and education of humanity in their own country and of other nations as well. 'Hurrying towards Zion' was the clear future goal of these educational institutions.⁷

Sharp-eyed theologians were well aware of the distinction between this cultural Protestantism, with its joyful proclamation of progress, and Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God, or the persecuted Christianity of earliest times, for the very reason that they expected from this cultural Protestantism the approach to the future kingdom of God. I may give two examples:

1. Johannes Weiss was a New Testament scholar and the son-in-law of Albrecht Ritschl. In 1882 (revised edition 1900) he published a book which made a considerable stir called *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reich Gottes*.⁸ As a historian he maintains that 'The kingdom of God is in Jesus' view an entirely supernatural entity which is in exclusive contrast to this world. That means that in the thinking of Jesus there can be no question of the kingdom of God's developing within this world'. But as 'a Christian belonging to his own time' he declared: 'The real difference between our modern Protestant world view and that of the first Christians is hence that we do not share the eschatological mood . . . We no longer pray "may grace come and the world pass away"; we live in the joyful confidence that this world will increasingly become the stage for "God's own humanity".'

2. This happy confidence in the world, then, was the mood of 1900. But fifty years earlier, for Richard Rothe, a Hegel pupil and the chairman of the Baden Protestant Association in Heidelberg, it was not just a mood. It was a firm conviction about the now

possible and necessary transition from the church to the kingdom of God on earth. Ultimately God wills the state, the perfected state, the moral theocracy, because he desires mature human beings. The pious churchgoer is a thing of the past, and is now replaced by the responsible Christian as an independent citizen in the realm of morality and culture. For in the progress of world history Christ himself is striding ahead. He is in the process of relinquishing his provisional way of life in the form of the church, and of acquiring his final, moral and political kingdom. Once that has been achieved, the church will have made itself superfluous, since it was a necessary but provisional educational institution. That is perfect millenarianism in modern secular form.⁹ Only in Christ's consummating kingdom does the Christian spirit abandon the form its life has taken in the church, and become the 'soul' of the worldwide political commonwealth, which will then for its part become 'the body of Christ'.

The Primal European Catastrophe and the End of Modern Christendom

The age of progress and expansion which began in the West with the industrial and the democratic revolution ended in 1914 in what George Steiner rightly called the 'primal European catastrophe' of the First World War. Afterwards nothing was the same. The age of catastrophes began. Verdun and Stalingrad, Auschwitz and Gulag Archipelago are names typifying the unimaginable crimes against humanity which marked the twentieth century. In them the progressive, modern, Christian world destroyed itself.

Without any justified or even detectible reasons for the war, the great Christian powers in Europe, which were just about to divide up the rest of the world between themselves, fell upon each other. It was a war of annihilation without any victory aims. A true symbol for this was the battle of Verdun in 1916.¹⁰ The German idea was that it was to be 'a battle of attrition'. After six months

there were more than 600,000 dead and almost no gains or losses of territory. In Ypres the Germans began the poison-gas war and profited nothing by it. It was only the intervention of the United States in 1917 which decided the war between the great European powers. In Germany the patriotic enthusiasm for the war developed into the pure nihilism with which Hitler continued and completed the task of destroying Europe in the Second World War. In the Soviet Union, Stalin exterminated whole classes and peoples through hard labour and hunger in the Gulag Archipelago. I need not describe any further what 'the age of catastrophes' brought on us in the twentieth century, because we may hope that with the end of the East-West conflict in 1989 this catastrophic age has also become a thing of the past.

What happened in 1914? The English foreign secretary Edward Grey found the apt word when he said: 'The lamps are going out all over Europe, and we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.' At the same time the lights of progress toward a better world, and the blessings to be conferred on the world through colonization, went out too. 'The Christian world' collapsed and 'the Christian era' ended. This was not indeed what Oswald Spengler called in 1922 'the downfall of the West',¹¹ but what followed was nonetheless 'an end to the modern world', as Romano Guardini wrote after the Second World War.

A depressing sign of the self-inflicted end was the religious enthusiasm for the war which in August 1914 seized not only students but even the most famous German professors. On 4 October 1914 a 'Call to the Civilized World' appeared, signed by ninety-three of the best-known professors, among them Adolf von Harnack, Max Planck, Gustav Röntgen, and twelve Catholic and Protestant theologians. The call ended as follows:

You who know us, who hitherto together with us have cherished the supreme possession of mankind, to you we appeal: believe us when we say that we shall fight this fight to the

finish as a civilized nation, for which the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, a Kant is as sacred as its own hearth and acre.¹²

With this, for the men who had signed the declaration, their own 'civilized nation' replaced the shared civilized world, and their 'own hearth' took the place of humanity. A little later the German 'Ideas of 1914' were published, signed by more than 250 German intellectuals.¹³ They were against the ideas of the French Revolution, and were therefore also against the principles of Kant, with his idea of world citizenship, a league of nations, and eternal peace. These ideas were replaced by Hegel's notion of the national spirit and his justification of the national state on the grounds of world history. German *Kultur* was to be elevated above French *civilisation*, and German 'idealism' over the English shop-keeper mentality. After the war this was bitterly regretted by Ernst Troeltsch, an important representative of *Kulturprotestantismus*.