The Future of Christianity in Western and Northern Europe

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'Atlas' is an evocative word. At least for those belonging to generations that came of age before the World Wide Web, it might bring back childhood memories of imaginary journeys through space or history accompanied by exquisitely illustrated works such as *The Times Atlas of World History*. Exploring the contemporary world with the guidance of *The Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009) is an equally fascinating and memorable experience. Among many other things, it exposes how the small circle of followers that gathered around a charismatic Jewish preacher 2,000 years ago has grown into the spectacular phenomenon that we today refer to as Global Christianity – the world's largest religion, comprising about a third of its population. As becomes clear from the detailed analyses of the series to which this volume belongs, Christianity still thrives across the globe. In particular, the volumes that cover Africa, Asia and Latin America testify to the power of the Christian tradition to transmute and adapt to ever-new contexts. In all these regions, Christianity is growing, in some places as rapidly as two to four times faster than the population.

By contrast, this volume offers a very different picture of the future of Christianity, one that brings to mind the suggestive designation of Europe as the *Abendland* – although not in the Orientalist sense of a culture that has reached maturity but, rather, as a place where the sun is going down and the day is reaching its end. The continent that was for more than a millennium the heartland of Christianity now looks more like a *Götterdämmerung*, a twilight of the gods, to allude to another suggestive term. Going through the essays of this volume, a few words stand out and reappear in the description of all the countries across Western and Northern Europe: secularisation, individualism, pluralism and nationalism. Although none of the essays does so explicitly, in contemporary European academia these components are often drawn together into an explanatory narrative – what I would like to refer to as 'the story of the loss of true Christianity' – that runs, by and large, as follows:

> During the decades following the Second World War, Western and Northern Europe experienced an exceptional period of economic growth combined with

> technological evolution and the establishment of progressive welfare states. As the general level of education and living standards rose, more and more Europeans felt estranged from traditional Christian beliefs and practices. The flip side of this development was – and still is – an increasingly individualist and consumerist culture. To the extent that the average European today visits a church, it is to light a candle or to enjoy a classical concert. These dissolving bonds between the Christian church and its adherents are in no small part the result of a failure by the churches themselves to live up to people's spiritual needs and to adapt to an increasingly pluralist society in a trustworthy way. Instead, churches are regularly fraught with scandals – from corruption to sexual abuse of minors – that have accelerated the alienation of people from the Christian tradition. However, just as Europeans seemed to be abandoning Christianity for good, a new trend emerged. With the upsurge of nationalism and populism in the twenty-first century, Christianity has regularly been invoked as an identity marker for national belonging and European civilisation. Yet this has little to do with true religious commitment. Rather, Christianity is being instrumentalised or even hijacked by far-right actors to serve as a bulwark against the presence of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

This narrative of Christianity's fate in contemporary Western and Northern Europe has more than one grain of truth. That more and more Europeans have turned their backs on traditional Christianity is an incontestable fact. The preceding essays reveal a steady decline in church affiliation and attendance since the Second World War in all the countries covered in the volume (only the Baltic states display a slightly different pattern, with a rise in church membership immediately after the end of the Soviet occupation in 1990, although numbers have been dropping in more recent years). It is fair to conclude that this development mirrors an increasingly individualist and consumerist culture in which people commit to organisations and activities only to the extent that they correspond to their values and needs. This also implies that people still do turn to churches, although precisely when it serves their own private interests: to have a traditional wedding in a beautiful setting; to light a candle in moments of anxiety or mourning; or to enjoy the overwhelming power of Bach or Handel in a large cathedral.

Furthermore, it is also correct to conclude that a significant factor behind many Europeans' discontent with the major churches is a severe loss of trust caused especially by the recurring revelations of sexual abuse among members of the clergy. To give but one example: in 2022, a record number of 522,821 German Catholics left their church, a peak that has been linked directly to the shock and anger felt by many in response to a series of abuse scandals in recent years (including efforts by prominent clergymen to sweep scandals under the carpet). That same year, 380,000 German Protestants left their church. Although the Protestant churches

have not been fraught with abuse scandals at all comparable to those of the Catholic Church, the record number also in the Protestant context is partly explained as a side-effect of the general distrust of Christian authorities caused by revelations of paedophilia in Catholic contexts.

Finally, as shown in several of the preceding essays, it is also true that recent decades have seen an increased investment in Christian rhetoric, symbols and narratives among nationalist and populist actors across Western and Northern Europe (and beyond). Examples range from apocalyptic tropes employed by far-right movements to more moderate references, by established nationalist parties, to Christianity as the backbone of Europe. Given that many of the figureheads of right-wing populism in Europe are hardly known for their commitment to Christianity as a personal matter, it is not far-fetched to conclude that their growing interest in the Christian tradition is less about honest conviction and more about a strategic use of Christianity as a nominal or negative identity that serves to demarcate those who belong from those who do not.

While all the components of 'the story of the loss of true Christianity' discussed so far are correct, it is nonetheless my contention that this narrative conceals a greater complexity. In the remainder of this concluding essay, I want to reflect on the future of Christianity in Western and Northern Europe by unravelling this complexity. I begin with the intricate relationship between Christianity and nationalism. Then I turn to a discussion of secularisation and the many dimensions implied in the concept. Finally, I conclude by proposing an approach to Christianity as *res publica* – a common concern of relevance and importance not only for those who identify as Christian believers.

Nationalism and Christian Identity

While the decades following the Second World War were exceptional in terms of social and economic development, they were also profoundly marked by the traumatic experiences of the preceding decades. The political reconstruction of Europe was guided by the mantra-like words 'never again' and generations of Europeans were raised with the ideals of tolerance and respect for human dignity. Against this background, it might seem perplexing that far-right nationalism is gaining ground in those very countries that only a few generations ago experienced some of the worst atrocities known in history. Equally perplexing – at least for those belonging to the secular majorities of the countries concerned – has been the ways in which the rising nationalist parties invoke the Christian heritage to buttress a purported national identity.

One of the more intriguing examples of this tendency is offered by the Sweden Democrats, which became the second-largest party in the

Swedish general elections of 2022. Unlike the other established nationalist parties of the Nordic countries, the Sweden Democrats have their roots in the neo-Nazi movement of the 1980s and 1990s. To the extent that this movement had any affiliation with religious beliefs and practices, it was with Old Norse mythology. Such references to paganism are now long gone, even as the party has vowed to rid itself of its racist and violent roots. As part of its major makeover during the 2000s and 2010s, the party has instead turned toward Christianity and proclaims, in its official policy document, the unique position of the Christian heritage in Sweden. However, just as emphatically as the privileged status of Christianity is proclaimed, the document also marks a clear distance from what is considered to be the least desirable religious tradition in the Swedish context: 'Islam, and in particular its strong political and fundamentalist branch, is according to the Sweden Democrats the religious view which has proven least capable to coexist with Swedish and Western culture in a harmonious way' ('Sverigedemokraternas principprogram 2019', at https://sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf, accessed 23 December 2022).

This dual pattern (embrace of Christianity – rejection of Islam) is familiar to anyone who has studied the rhetoric of the established nationalist parties across Western and Northern Europe – from the UK Independence Party in Britain to Alternative for Germany, the Danish People's Party or the Finns Party in Continental Europe. Even in France, where the far right for a long time kept in line with the strong secularist tradition of the country, Christianity is increasingly being invoked as an identity marker for genuine French culture – including its strong tradition of *laïcité*. Thus, Marine Le Pen – despite her fierce criticism of the Catholic Church at times – has repeatedly made reference to the Christian roots of the secular principles on which her party relies.

In all these instances, there is little doubt that the claim to Christianity as a form of identity has emerged as a reaction to widespread Muslim immigration (tellingly, several of the nationalist parties across the region have simultaneously revised their attitude toward Jews and Judaism, increasingly referring to a common 'Judaeo-Christian' past over against Islam). However, it is problematic for several reasons to describe this tendency merely in terms of 'hijacking' or 'instrumentalisation', to refer back to what I described above as 'the story of the loss of true Christianity'. It is problematic, firstly, because it presumes that there is such a thing as a pure or true Christianity which has illegitimately been stolen and perverted by nationalist actors. A quick glance at history reminds us that reality is more complex. Throughout European modernity, the intertwining of nationalism and Christianity through constitutions, state churches and popular

imagination has been the rule rather than the exception. It is also true that Christianity itself contains tropes that lend themselves to nationalist interpretations (think, for example, of the ubiquitous motif of the Suffering Christ as a model and inspiration for the heroic soldier in almost every modern European war). Without denying that nominal Christian values can be instrumentalised and serve as an argument for stronger national identity, it is important also to recognise the difficulty in claiming an authentic Christianity beyond the purportedly illegitimate claims laid to it.

Secondly, the idea of Christianity being hijacked by unscrupulous populist actors is problematic because it is out of touch with empirical reality. Above all, it tends to obscure that Christian individuals, communities and denominations are today deeply divided about questions pertaining to nationalism and European identity. As heated debates on immigration have shown, Christian symbols can be invoked to motivate liberal immigration politics as well as to stir up anti-immigration sentiments. It is therefore a simplification to indicate that nationalist claims to Christianity are only nominal and championed by actors with no personal commitment to Christian beliefs and practices.

A few examples from different contexts covered in this volume may illustrate the complexity of the situation. In Denmark, a strong emphasis on the Lutheran heritage has been part and parcel of the Danish People's Party from its inception. Among its prominent figures for many years were (the two cousins) Jesper Langballe and Søren Krarup, both Lutheran priests closely affiliated with the conservative Lutheran periodical *Tidehverv*. The Lutheran affiliation of the Danish People's Party received a new impulse in 2022 with the election of Morten Messerschmidt as its chairman. Less than a year before, Messerschmidt had published *Den kristne arv* (The Christian Heritage), an apologia for Christianity as the foundation of Danish culture and democracy, but also a biographical account of his own journey from being a staunch atheist to embracing a personal Christian faith.

Drawing on this example, one might still be inclined to conclude that this is just about a few profiled individuals putting their Christian conviction in the service of a particular political agenda. However, as the Finnish theologian Risto Saarinen has shown in several works, today nationalist political actors show clear tendencies to ally themselves with morally conservative Christians, and vice versa. Saarinen illustrates this point by reference to his own Finnish context as well as to France. Especially in connection with the legalisation of same-sex marriage (in France in 2012 and in Finland in 2017), both countries saw the emergence of popular Christian movements – La Manif Pour Tous ('The Demonstration for Everyone') and Aito Avioliitto ('Genuine Marriage'), respectively – which opposed the amended law while aligning with right-wing political agendas.

Yet differences between the two contexts should not be blurred. While traditionalist Catholics in France and evangelical Christians in Finland share a morally conservative agenda with regard to gender roles and sexuality, they differ (in general terms) for example when it comes to immigration. As revealed by a 2018 Pew study, churchgoing (but also non-practising) Christians in France are significantly more negative toward immigration than religiously unaffiliated people (35% in comparison with 21%). By contrast, in Finland church-attending Christians are considerably less negative toward immigration than religiously unaffiliated people: while 33% of 'nones' think that immigration should be reduced, the number of practising Christians who hold this view amounts to 19%. Similar patterns can be discerned for example in Lithuania. In an ongoing study based on in-depth interviews with practising Catholics, the political scientist Rosita Garškaitė shows that this group is generally appreciative of far-right discourses on family values and sexuality (including their condemnation of so-called 'LGBT ideology') while simultaneously disapproving of their harsh anti-immigration rhetoric.

These few examples may suffice to illustrate the complexity of the ways in which Christianity intertwines with nationalism – including patriarchal, homophobic and xenophobic (in particular anti-Muslim) sentiments – across Western and Northern Europe today. As has become clear, these are all attitudes found among people who identify as Christians, although in a variety of combinations: some will embrace a progressive view on sexuality and gender while expressing strong anti-Muslim sentiments; others will defend patriarchal family values and condemn same-sex relations while being in favour of a generous immigration policy. It should also be emphasised that 'nationalism' does not necessarily go hand in hand with any of the attitudes mentioned above. On the contrary, as the Scottish theologian Doug Gay has argued (in line with the social democratic profile of the Scottish National Party), nationalism can just as well go hand in hand with radical and emancipatory ideals, as has often been the case in imperial and colonial contexts.

All of this makes it exceedingly difficult to defend the assertion that there is a true or authentic Christianity that is being betrayed by certain actors in contemporary Europe. Does this mean that we should resign and accept any claim to Christianity as being as accurate as any other? I would be reluctant to draw this conclusion. The investment in Christianity for various ideological purposes will most likely continue to be a prominent feature across the region in the years ahead. Rather than encouraging resignation, this development calls for the need of a continuing critical conversation about the core message of the Christian tradition and how it should be lived and practised today. However, for such a conversation to

be honest and trustworthy, we need first to recognise the complexities that I have tried to highlight above and which I shall continue to elaborate in the following section.

Secularisation as Transfiguration

The region covered in this volume is often described as one of the most secularised parts of the world. This is especially the case with the Scandinavian countries, which are regularly held up as a model (or a negative example, depending on one's general attitude toward secularisation) for enlightened, progressive societies that have left religion behind. In significant respects, the overview given by the preceding essays confirms this picture. As already noted, statistics show a steady decline in church membership as well as attendance since the Second World War – in several countries with a clear acceleration of the decline since the 1990s. Furthermore, numbers of baptisms, weddings and funerals have been decreasing in the historical denominations during the same period, while simultaneously becoming less 'confessional' in the sense that liturgies are increasingly being adapted to the needs and demands of the largely secular audiences who still turn to the churches for these rites.

However, as noted by Keith Clements in his essay on the social and political dimensions of the region, there is today considerable debate among sociologists of religion 'on what "secularisation" denotes beyond statistics, and even on what those statistics actually signify about attitudes to religion'. And to be sure, it is not only sociologists who are debating the concept. Recent decades have seen a growing concern about the deficiency of the classical secularisation theory also among anthropologists, political scientists and historians of religion. Needless to say, this is not about questioning the obvious statistical facts referred to above. Rather, as suggested by Clements, the debate is about what the secularisation narrative prevents us from seeing beyond the data provided by polls and surveys. Accordingly, increasing attention has been paid to the more subtle ways in which the Christian inheritance lives on and continues to shape cultural artefacts as well as social and political norms in contemporary European societies.

Pondering the future of Christianity in Western and Northern Europe therefore needs to involve a richer and deeper understanding of the process of secularisation, including the difficulties in delimiting the religious from the secular. As the German theologian Jörg Lauster has suggested in a comprehensive effort to provide a 'cultural history of Christianity' (*Die Verzauberung der Welt: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Christentums*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016), the process of secularisation has not simply entailed a loss of Christian articulations but, rather, a transfiguration. In this sense, Christianity lives on not only in its canonical forms (the Bible,

dogma and liturgy) but also in 'secular' art, music, literature and film. One may even argue that during European modernity, artists and writers have sometimes had a greater capacity to offer a profound articulation of the biblical symbols than theologians and the clergy.

Shifting the perspective in this way will allow us to look at some of the cultural patterns revealed in the previous essays with different eyes. This is perhaps especially the case with regard to the affinity many Europeans feel with the aesthetic dimensions of the Christian tradition. For example, while attendance at regular church services has been falling, people still turn up in large numbers when the great works of sacred music are performed. Returning for a moment to 'the story of the loss of true Christianity', this tendency is often described (sometimes in a slightly condescending tone) as an expression of the individualist and consumerist mentality of contemporary Europeans. But what if this is not the entire picture? At the end of the twentieth century, the late novelist and member of the Swedish Academy Birgitta Trotzig made a thought-provoking reflection with a critical nod to the incapacity of the Church of Sweden to respond in a sensitive way to the dwindling number of churchgoers:

> There is an enormous hunger for truly religious forms, that is, for ritual and liturgical expressions. It is impoverishing when the rite consists of a citizen giving practical advice from the pulpit. But when it comes to Bach, even the largest cathedrals are filled, which is by no means a matter of 'aestheticism', but rather testifies to a sense, of a very broad audience, for what the sacred really is. (*Dagens Nyheter*, 20 December 1998)

Trotzig's words are thought-provoking because they suggest that decline in church attendance is not necessarily tantamount to indifference to Christian symbols, narratives and rites. If many Europeans have become more selective in their interaction with churches, it is perhaps to some extent also because they have developed a more reflected relationship to their Christian past. This sheds light not only on the affinity many people feel with the aesthetic but also with the ethical dimensions of the Christian tradition. As revealed by recent data presented in several of the previous essays, one of the main reasons for people to remain as formal members of the historical denominations is their high esteem for the social and diaconal work of the churches. Likewise, one of the main sources of many Europeans' discontent with the major churches is the loss of trust caused by the recurring revelations of corruption and sexual abuse among the clergy. These patterns call for a deeper critical reflection, one that moves beyond the standard explanation of Europeans as being trapped in their individualist and consumerist behaviour. When, for example, German Catholics leave their church as a result of the shock and anger felt

in response to the revelations of paedophilia, perhaps this should be seen not as an abandonment of Christianity but, rather, as an act of fidelity to a tradition that has at its core a commitment to the weak and the vulnerable: 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25: 40).

This is not to deny that significant distinctions are to be made between people who self-identify as Christian and people who clearly do not want to be associated with the Christian tradition. Nonetheless, the examples above remind us that reality is more complex than the categories of 'religious' versus 'secular' or 'believer' versus 'non-believer' are often able to capture. Referring again to the Scandinavian countries, recent sociological studies suggest that only a minority of people define themselves as traditional theists and atheists, while many people relate to some aspects of the Christian tradition and distance themselves from others. Even official representatives (deacons, pastors, priests, bishops) of the Christian faith exhibit great variety with regard to which parts of the tradition are embraced and which are rejected. Once more, this raises the intricate question about who owns or defines Christianity. Is it the clerical authorities or the ordinary churchgoers? Is it those who self-identify as Christians or those who embody the spirit of the Christian message in their daily life? Is it the churches that are growing or those with the strongest continuity with the past? In the concluding section, I will suggest that no one has a privileged access to the Christian gospel, although everyone should be invited to take part in an ongoing critical conversation about the content, value and meaning of the Christian inheritance.

Christianity as *res publica*

I began this reflection on the future of Christianity in Western and Northern Europe by referring to the image of Europe as a twilight zone where the sun seems to be setting over Christianity. During the process of writing, yet more statistics have been released that confirm the fading of Christianity across the region. Perhaps most sensationally, the publication of the 2021 census in the United Kingdom revealed that Christianity is now a minority religion in England and Wales: 46.2% of people identify themselves as Christians in comparison with 59.3% in 2011. During the same period, those who ticked 'no religion' rose by more than 8 million, from 25% to 37% of the population.

The importance of such data for gaining a richer understanding of the current status of Christianity in Europe should not be underestimated. Yet it has been my intention in this essay also to draw out the subtler and more complex patterns that are not immediately revealed by statistics, and which tend to become even more obscured when they are interwoven

in simplifying accounts of the sort I referred to initially as 'the story of the loss of true Christianity'. As I have suggested, interpreting current developments in terms of a transfiguration rather than a simple fading or loss of Christianity is helpful in many ways. It allows us, for one thing, to recognise how Christian ideas and values live on also among people who are nominally defined as 'cultural Christians', 'secular' or 'nones'.

These incongruous developments are likely to continue as people become increasingly selective in what they believe and adhere to. Indeed, already a strong trend of 'hybrid' or 'patchwork' spirituality outside as well as within the churches has emerged. You will find, for example, people who have a firm belief in God but find the doctrine of the Trinity obscure, while others might embrace Christian neighbour ethics and yet reject ideas of original sin or predestination. Still other people might feel aligned with the aesthetic or liturgical aspects of the Christian tradition while being estranged from their church's official position on an array of issues. Add to this the growing number of individuals living with multiple identities, often combining bits and pieces of several religious and cultural traditions.

To be sure, these tendencies of transfiguration and hybridisation are not the only trends we are seeing today. Perhaps as a symptomatic reaction to what is perceived as a process of disintegration, voices are also being raised for a return to or a safeguarding of more 'classical' or 'authentic' forms of Christianity. Sometimes such calls are made with reference to national identity, as in the right-wing populist claim to Christianity. Thus, to refer back to an earlier example, the Sweden Democrats (similarly to several other nationalist parties across the region) are regularly reproaching the Church of Sweden for being 'politicised' and for forfeiting 'classical Christian faith' in favour of 'socialist and liberal postures' (quotations are taken from a policy document issued during the run-up to the church elections in 2017: 'Tro och tradition: Från (S)venska kyrkan till Svenska kyrkan', at https://sd.se/wp-content /uploads /2017/07/Kyrkovalsmanifest.pdf, accessed 16 April 2019).

This being said, it should immediately be added that calls for authenticity and a clearly defined Christian message are not always and not necessarily imbricated with nationalist political agendas. Rather, in many instances they testify to an honest search for both spiritual renewal and a stronger focus on the Christian gospel in response to the social and political challenges that we are facing today – including nationalism, racism and mounting poverty. As shown in several of the preceding essays, recent decades have seen the growth and prospering of ecumenical initiatives as well as spiritual renewal movements across national and denominational boundaries. Examples of the former include Together

for Europe (a network that brings together Christian communities and movements across the continent to work for peace and justice) as well as the ecumenical community of Taizé in France (which continues to attract Christian youth from all over the world). Examples of the latter include Charismatic movements such as Oase in the Scandinavian countries and New Wine in Britain, both of which operate mainly within the established churches by providing inspirational resources, leadership training and summer conferences.

The trend of Charismatic renewal movements within and across churches in Western and Northern Europe deserves further comment. Among the factors that have triggered – and which continue to nourish – this trend are the impulses from non-European lived Christianity. When, for example, the Anglican bishop David Pytches initiated the New Wine movement in the late 1980s, he was in significant ways inspired by his long experience of serving as bishop among Aricanian Indians in Chile. But Charismatic renewal has come not only through the impressions brought home by missionaries and clergy serving abroad. Since the 1970s, almost all countries covered in this volume have experienced large immigration inflows, including a growing community of ethnic minority Christians. To give an example, the small town of Södertälje in Sweden is home to one of the largest communities of Syrian Orthodox Christians in the world, with a thriving church life, two cathedrals and an Orthodox theological seminary. Another example could be drawn from the United Kingdom. While Christianity is becoming a minority religion and church membership is declining among the white majority population, Charismatic and in particular Pentecostal Christianity is growing among ethnic minority Brits and new churches are continually being established.

The growing presence of those who are sometimes referred to as 'diaspora Christians' holds much promise and is already reinvigorating Christianity in significant ways in Western and Northern Europe. Yet, as detailed by Martina Björkander in her essay on Pentecostals, the rapid growth of Charismatic migrant churches brings both opportunities and challenges. While the vibrant personal faith of diaspora Christians has an inspirational power and is often perceived as more 'authentic' or 'true' than the 'watered-down' faith of the established churches, they often maintain strongly patriarchal structures and condemn same-sex love. And to be sure, it is not only the old European churches that are fraught with abuse and corruption scandals. Many of the Evangelical movements currently spreading across the globe contain strong elements of the prosperity gospel. Examples include the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a Pentecostal church that began in Brazil, which today attracts large numbers of young people from predominantly less-well-off

ethnic minority communities in the United Kingdom. As revealed by a report in the *Guardian* in late 2022 – based on extensive interviews with 30 former members of the UCKG – followers are being pressured to donate large amounts of money in return for blessings from God, while the church's founder, the Forbes list billionaire Edir Macedo, flies around the world in his private jet. Other interviewees testify to how they felt encouraged to cut ties with friends and family, while yet others have the experience of being told that demon possession was the cause of mental health issues or their sexuality.

To summarise this journey through Christianity's many forms and manifestations in contemporary Western and Northern Europe, the picture that emerges is rich and motley: from racist claims advanced by nationalist Christian movements to charity work dedicated to welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees into our societies; from Christian communities emphasising female submission to churches with powerful women leaders (including pastors, priests, bishops and archbishops); from pastors promulgating prosperity theology to Christian individuals committing to diaconal work among the marginalised and the poor.

Which of these tendencies will be dominant in the future hinges to a large degree on who contributes to defining Christianity. If I am to express my own modest aspiration, I hope we will see a growing public theological conversation about the Christian inheritance. Caring for Christianity as *res publica* would mean recognising that Christian symbols are dynamic and need to be critically interpreted in each particular cultural context, allowing, not least, for exclusive interpretations to be challenged. Importantly, this invitation to enter the 'conflict of interpretations' (to use a famous phrase of the French Protestant thinker Paul Ricœur) is not reserved to any particular grouping. On the contrary, it acknowledges that the Christian legacy may equally be of concern, importance and relevance for people who do not self-identify as Christians, including people of other confessions.

Am I hereby suggesting that we should give up any claim to the truth of Christianity? That would certainly be a tall claim, especially for a tradition that at its core has a figure who declared 'I am the way, and the truth and the life'. No, I am not suggesting that Christianity has no truth or no core – only that truth in Christianity is a calling, an endless task to fulfil. And I am quite confident that the explosive message of that charismatic Jewish preacher 2,000 years ago will continue, for yet a very long time, to reverberate also in the seemingly Godforsaken land of Western and Northern Europe. For, to quote the beautiful poem 'Nuclear' by the late Welsh poet and priest R. S. Thomas, 'What word so explosive as that one Palestinian word with the endlessness of its fallout?'

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