

## INTRODUCTION

The ‘utter strangeness’<sup>1</sup> of the confessional faith we know in the Western world today as Christianity has somewhat lost its edge. Almost everything that scandalised both 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish and Graeco-Roman audiences has come to be accepted in the West as self-evident, if not *passe*. In *Dominion*, one of the many arguments which Tom Holland builds is that the genesis of Christianity was an ethically revolutionary movement, that has ever been gathering steam.<sup>2</sup> Much of what our society believes has come to us from many centuries of the core message of Christianity taking root and sprouting into every aspect of our lives. Holland makes the case that whether we are secular or religious in the West today — what we believe about Human Rights, where history is going, sexuality and treatment of the less fortunate, are all deeply influenced by the Christian tradition.

The true purpose of this paper is not only to critically engage with Holland’s thesis, but to weigh the value of his insights for the Church’s mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western world. Why use Holland’s work for this endeavour? Namely, to paraphrase Burns, there is value in seeing ourselves as others see us.<sup>3</sup> Holland has a valuable perspective as one who has come to reckon with the Christian bent of his surroundings,<sup>4</sup> but who does not exactly identify as what Christians would term a believer.<sup>5</sup> One may then ask, what has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What value can we find for Christian mission from a secular historian? This is where it is helpful to take a classically reformed approach when

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion- The Making of the Western Mind* (Little Brown: London, 2019), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, xxv.

<sup>3</sup> *O wad some Power the giftie gie us*

*To see oursels as ithers see us!*, Robert Burns, *To A Louse*.

<sup>4</sup> ‘In my morals and ethics, I was not a Spartan or a Roman at all. That my belief in God had faded over the course of my teenage years did not mean that I had ceased to be Christian. For a millennium and more, the civilisation into which I had been born was Christendom.’

Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Bethel McGrew, ‘Tom Holland: A Christian Hero’, *The Critic*, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021, <https://thecritic.co.uk/tom-holland-a-christian-hero/>, accessed 15.04.2022.

‘He may not be ready to make a full confession of small “o” orthodox faith, but as he admitted in conversation with evangelist Glen Scrivener, he cannot deny that he is compelled to “surrender to the story,” whatever this means exactly.’

seeking to integrate theology and culture.<sup>6</sup> As Bavinck observed, if all truth has its origin in the God of truth, we ought to take stock of it wherever it may appear.<sup>7</sup> Further, given the startling statistics in terms of the Church's shrinkage in the West, surely it behoves us to learn humbly from whatever sources we can, about seeking to continue our mission.

The central thesis that Holland puts forward, and the subsequent question for the Western church's mission are both quite simple. Holland argues that Christianity, particularly its ethics and eschatological presuppositions have been so thoroughly baked into Western society— that they are no longer noticeable. The question for the Church is, if this thesis holds water, where do we go from here — particularly when so much of what made our faith radical has now been absorbed as normative? Has much of our missionary impetus and value been cut off, in a sense, by our success at influencing the society at large?

In the following, Holland's thesis will be critically analysed under the headings of human rights and epistemology, sexuality, Marxism, and eschatology in Part 1. Thereafter, a response will be offered in Part 2 seeking to apply the findings and implications of his work for our approach to human rights, the supernatural aspect of Christian belief, and finally the issue of power and weakness in our culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) Kindle Location 457-459. 'Man seeks to realize in this world that which is good for himself as a being within time. He transforms nature, he uses animals and cultural objects not merely to satisfy his basic needs, but also to impress his idea and ideals upon matter. He longs for truth, beauty, and goodness and expresses this longing in music, poetry, painting, and gives expression to his spiritual aspiration by building cathedrals, mosques, or pagodas.'

<sup>7</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 2 *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 209-210.

## 1 ETHICS & ESCHATOLOGY

### The progress from Jesus' teachings through the ages to basic Western axioms.

#### *a. Human Rights and Epistemology*

Absolutely central to Holland's thesis, is the claim that human rights, the basic concern of dignity and wellbeing for one's fellow man or woman, emerges not from the Enlightenment, or indeed natural law—but from canon law in the middle age Catholic church—and beyond that, the teachings of Holy Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

One of the main effects Holland argues Christianity has had is that the concept of human rights is now a ubiquitous axiom of western civilisation.<sup>9</sup> Firstly, let us consider how Holland sets the historical scene of the *Sitz im Leben* in which Christianity emerges. If it is to be claimed an ethical revolution of some sort has taken place,<sup>10</sup> it is fitting that the contrast with what came before is fully set out. Holland does this by parsing the myths of power, glory and prowess esteemed in the Hellenistic world.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate this cultural situation, Holland draws on evidence from Homer's writing to show that prayer was synonymous with boasting in his poetry. Reified tales of rape and pillage by Zeus support this picture. Indeed, a further crucial detail, in its revelation about the cultural forces at play, is the aspirational motif in the *Iliad* that to 'blaze like a golden flame' and attain a 'godlike pitch' was 'to be most fully a man'.<sup>12</sup> Holland employs these sources from antiquity to support two critical claims. Firstly, that power and valour were venerated (and weakness despised), and that the Hellenistic world was male dominated, which continues to be true as Christianity emerges in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Undoubtedly this is of huge consequence, as it is well

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 385-386. It ought to be explained, this is a summary and Holland makes no such grand leap. Rather he builds a historical case for the mounting influence of Christianity upon communities, societies and eventually the Roman Empire, until its ethical axioms come to be used for common law in the Middle Ages.

<sup>9</sup> David E. Aune, 'Human Rights and Early Christianity', *Christianity and Human Rights - An Introduction*, Ed., Witte Jr, John. Christianity and Human Rights (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 14.

documented that children, women, and slaves were all vastly inferior to men in the authority based social stratification of the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>13</sup>

We may note at this point that the current milieu of the 21<sup>st</sup> century West is far removed from such a situation, replete with women's and children's rights, imperfect though our systems may be.<sup>14</sup> In chapter twelve it is demonstrated how Hitler's anthropology was little more than a return to an ancient worldview of the strong eating the weak, which is why we view and treat it as aberration in the West.<sup>15</sup> Something has changed in our ethical principles since the 1<sup>st</sup> century, but how and when did this change take place? Holland stacks up several key points to shed light on this. Firstly, in chapter three, the scene in Galatia is pivotal for Holland's thesis where St Paul teaches that there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, pressing this historically disruptive idea further, Holland sees the portrayal of Christ in the early church as central to this ethic:

That Christ – whose participation in the divine sovereignty over space and time ... had become human, and suffered death on the ultimate instrument of torture, was precisely the measure of Paul's understanding of God: that he was love. The world stood transformed as a result.<sup>17</sup>

A sound observation here, with which Christian theology heartily resonates, is the costliness of Christ's redemption. Paul grounds much of his Christology throughout the epistle to the Galatians in the Old Testament motif of securing redemption and freedom. It stands to reason this exemplary movement by the God of Heaven, engendered a

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<sup>13</sup> Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter Ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 353-368.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Aune, 'Human Rights and Early Christianity', 81. Aune notes that while much of our modern liberal democratic institutions take shape in the 18<sup>th</sup> century enlightenment, he is also in agreement with Holland's claim that the roots lie in the Christian revolution 2000 years ago.

<sup>15</sup> 'As in Italy, so in Germany, fascism worked to combine the glamour and the violence of antiquity with that of the modern world. There was no place in this vision of the future for the mewling feebleness of Christianity.' Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 456.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 69.

new egalitarian kinship among the followers, seeking to emulate His gracious treatment of them.<sup>18</sup> And indeed it seems this seed of equality for all, continued to germinate as shown by the decision of two wealthy Cappadocians, Basil and Gregory in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to devote their lives to the poor, driven by the belief that ‘dignity, which no philosopher had ever taught, might be possessed by the stinking, toiling masses, was for all’.<sup>19</sup> When canon law begins to be hammered out by a monk named Gratian around 1150, it is his search for a guiding ethic to iron out apparent inconsistencies in various ecclesial decrees that leads him to settle upon the golden rule—which heavily influences the Western legal tradition as a result.<sup>20</sup> To love neighbour as oneself is venerated as the supreme rule, although at this point in the thesis there seems a little confusion between Paul’s admonition and Jesus’ summary of the law and prophets.<sup>21</sup>

But for Holland, is this ethical revolution properly grounded in Christ or in Paul? Biblical scholarship has often stressed the dichotomy between the teachings ascribed to Christ and Paul, and the apparent tension therein.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, in biblical studies this debate has frequently encompassed the doctrine of Justification, and Jesus’ stress on the Kingdom of God more so than Paul.<sup>23</sup> Scholars such as Aune have argued that Jesus’ mission and ministry was anything but inclusive or universal in affirming other ethnicities:

As the founder of a revitalization movement, Jesus was primarily interested in the restoration of all Israel in the end time... To that extent his proclamation of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of

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<sup>18</sup> Graham A. Cole, *The God Who Became Human* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2013), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> Holland takes us through the historical narrative of the Catholic Church’s dilemma in the Middle Ages, as it had spent centuries issuing canon law and decree, sometimes in a disparate manner. Thus, it fell to Gratian to begin the work of systematising, and indeed bringing some coherence to these. Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 222.

<sup>21</sup> Holland writes: ‘God, so they believed wrote his rulings on the human heart. Paul’s authority on this score was definitive. “The entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbour as yourself.’ The latter is obviously from the sermon on the mount rather than St Paul, but insofar as love for others is to be a guiding ethics it makes little difference in the grand scheme of the thesis.

<sup>22</sup> Scott McKnight, ‘Jesus vs Paul’ in *Christianity Today*, 54 no 12 Dec 2010, 24-29.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew D. Jensen, ‘Justification in Jesus and Paul: two voices in unison’, *The Reformed Theological Review*, 77 no 3 Dec 2018, 172-192, 172.

God was an ethnocentric message, for Jesus did not regard either himself or his disciples as having a mission to the Gentiles.<sup>24</sup>

So is Jesus' ministry ethno-centric, and has Holland subsequently based this key element of his thesis on a later interpolation from Pauline thought?<sup>25</sup> To this we may bring two rejoinders. Firstly, the ethno-centricity of Christ's mission, when read in a canon-wide eschatological framework, is consistent with an ever-expanding guest list to the God of Israel's table.<sup>26</sup> The capstone of this trajectory would be the great commission—to preach the gospel to all nations. In terms of Christ's mission, an exegetical argument can also be made from John 12:20-26 that the arrival of the Greeks at Passover was a presage of the passion event— since Christ's death would be the catalyst for the spread of God's salvation to all people.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, Holland consistently traces the expanding equality in Christian Europe to the very core of Christ's ministry and teaching, in so far as it was received this way in church tradition.<sup>28</sup> Holland illustrates this perhaps most poignantly through a historical vignette in the story of Martin, bishop of Tours in 4<sup>th</sup> century Gaul. He lived as a poor beggar in obedience to Christ's command to 'sell all he had'.<sup>29</sup> A touching tale is retold of his former army career, when he had cut his cloak in two to warm a freezing and foreign beggar. Set against the backdrop of Roman snobbery and ethnocentricity, Holland connects this vitality of faith to the famed parable of the good Samaritan told by Jesus. Further, with a view to analysis to come, we must note yet another recurring theme in this account of how Christianity changed the West. It often had the characteristic feature of radical self-denial, obedience to Christ, even to great personal cost. It

<sup>24</sup> David E. Aune, 'Human Rights and Early Christianity', 83.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Spencer, 'Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind', *Modern Believing*, 62 no 1 2021, 77-79, 79. Spencer concurs with this observation, and goes further, stating that 'the life and teaching of Christ are largely a shadowy presence in the book'. Spencer acknowledges however this doesn't make a material difference to the thesis, and its strength. It must also be borne in mind how effectively Holland places the 'Kenosis' event of Christ's incarnation and humiliating death as a truly revolutionary spark that begun this great conflagration.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 14:15-24. Key to the interpretation of this passage, ironically, is the Kingdom bypassing many Jews to those who would have been considered societally and religiously unimportant, those on the very fringes of society.

<sup>27</sup> Edward W. Klink III, *John – Zondervan Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 811.

<sup>28</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, ix.

Perhaps most poignantly, in the story of Martin, bishop of Tours in 4<sup>th</sup> century Gaul, who lived as a poor beggar in obedience to Christ's command to 'sell all he had', Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 130.

could be argued, this concern for charity and justice, often in contradistinction to the prevailing norms of society where Christian communities find themselves, is a missional ethic that stretches back to the Torah.<sup>30</sup> The centrality of such a counter-cultural ethic emerges as a common denominator where Christianity has made a lasting cultural impact, from the ancient world to the modern.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the historical evidence presented in *Dominion* for the positive change Christianity has affected in the West, not all agree our human rights emerge from Christianity. In 1952 the precursor organisation to Humanists International hammered out the Amsterdam Declaration—a summary of basic human rights and responsibilities which utterly eschews reliance on or acknowledgement of religion.<sup>32</sup> The milieu of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western world saw a hurtling towards autonomy as the highest virtue, an increasing ease with which belief could be abandoned, and so a rise in wholly naturalistic explanations for everything from the cosmos to human rights.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most recognisable front of this movement in popular culture has been the ‘New Atheists’. A key contention set out by the ‘New Atheists’, is that human rights are something we can attain through scientific enquiry, with no need of religious dogma.<sup>34</sup> A salient example may be found in Sam Harris’ *The Moral Landscape*, where he argues that virtue may arise perfectly plausibly from naturalistic and evolutionary impulses:

Many people imagine that the theory of evolution entails selfishness as a biological imperative. This popular misconception has been very harmful to the reputation of science... In truth, human cooperation and its attendant moral emotions are fully compatible with biological evolution. Selection pressure at the

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<sup>30</sup> Martin C. Salter, *Mission in Action: A Biblical Description of Missional Ethics* (London: Apollos, 2019), 228. Here Salter draws on the imperative for Israel to be like Yahweh, in that ‘all His ways are just’, Deuteronomy 32.

<sup>31</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1986), 132. ‘A preaching of the gospel that calls men and women to accept Jesus as Saviour but does not make it clear that discipleship means commitment to a vision of society radically different from that which controls public life today must be condemned as false’.

<sup>32</sup> Amsterdam Declaration (updated) 2002, <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>, accessed 19.04.2022.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Bellknop of Harvard University Press, 2007), 479.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Berhow ‘Did the New Atheists Rationally Lack Belief?’, *Themelios*, 45 no 3 Dec 2020, 610-619.

level of “selfish” genes would surely incline creatures like ourselves to make sacrifices for our relatives.<sup>35</sup>

In short, we have no need for a creator to guide us toward such things as human rights and values of kinship. ‘As we better understand the brain, we will increasingly understand all of the forces—kindness, reciprocity, trust, openness to argument, respect for evidence, intuitions of fairness, impulse control, the mitigation of aggression’.<sup>36</sup> Harris argues that such impulses to co-operate, sacrifice, and help one another arise out of our common kinship and quasi-selfish desire to pass on our bloodline. But Holland rejects this thesis. In *Dominion* hammers this nail repeatedly, reflecting on the power of Christian ideas in the modern West:

That every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely self-evident a truth. A Roman would have laughed at it. To campaign against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality, however, was to depend on large numbers of people sharing in a common assumption: that everyone possessed an inherent worth. The origins of this principle – as Nietzsche had so contemptuously pointed out – lay not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.<sup>37</sup>

Holland offers a tour-de-force of historical analysis to counter the idea that anything approximating human rights is natural or normative in history.<sup>38</sup> Further, much of Harris’ aspirational writing, towards a humanity of ever-increasing co-operation, is surely nothing if not redolent with Christian eschatological hopes of a world to come. Why would this be apparent, in the writings of an avowed atheist?

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<sup>35</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (London: Bantam, 2010), 56.

<sup>36</sup> Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 478.

<sup>38</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 477-478. At this point in His thesis Holland has laboured to show the progress of the ethical standard of ‘love thy neighbour’, as it survived and evolved from the ancient world, into the Middle Ages and even being the animus for Dr Martin Luther King’s Civil Rights movement in modernity. Contrasting the attitude of Dr King with John Lennon, he shows that actually neither would have been so motivated by the ethic of love, were it not for a profoundly Christian influence on their environment.

Charting the history of atheism as an ideology and social movement reveals an important insight about its origin. A case can be made that this trajectory begins with Isaac Newton. Ultimately, it is the stout faith of Newtown which motivates his scientific discoveries. But paradoxically, his work leads to a reliance on self-governing natural laws that seem to erode the metaphysical need for a Creator and Sustainer. Thus:

This development paved the way for atheism, since theism that was built on scientific knowledge eventually generated its own negation... Atheism, then, was not an external challenge to theism but rather the result of a revolution within theology itself, which is to say that the origins of modern atheism are ultimately theological.<sup>39</sup>

The growing tension in Christendom had been an epistemological one, with rising suspicion that the Church may not have a lock on God's truth, after all. From Luther's right to private interpretation to the bloody battles for religious liberty in the Glorious Revolution, Holland shows how suspicion of authority led to a rather fractured approach to truth in the protestant church:

One believer's anarchy might just as well be another's freedom. Presbyterians who sought to make criminals of other Protestants ... had to tread carefully... Every Christian had to be free to seek his own path to God. It was not the business of a state, still less that of the Church to trammel the workings of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

In a sense, the above has explanatory power for a great deal of post Christendom society in the West. One might argue that the schism of the Church, and challenge to early modern papal authority, opened the floodgates for a crisis of epistemology— and laid the groundwork for a vast patchwork of privately constructed beliefs. In a word, individualism.<sup>41</sup> And Holland carefully builds his argument from here on.

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>40</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 351.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Belknap, 2007), 230.

He sees the Deism and Rationalism of the Enlightenment as a natural product of the reformation.<sup>42</sup> This in turn paved the way for the positivism and ‘science alone’ dogma which came to characterise so much modern Western thought, portraying medieval Christendom as a ‘hellhole of backwardness’.<sup>43</sup> Thus a complex historical picture is drawn with a modern West utterly devoted to the idea of human rights and common kinship — while also rejecting any supernatural origin of such values.

This could be viewed in one of two ways. Either the values and development of Christianity contained the seeds of its own erosion once its epistemology developed to such a point, or, such secular worldviews are natural offspring of Christianity and potentially offer a roadmap back to ‘the enchanted garden’ of belief, where the very idea of our human rights had their beginning. Whichever is the case, Holland clearly has done a fine job of demonstrating the intertwined relationship between our sense of human rights in the West, and the developing epistemology from Christianity to secular humanism.

### *b. Sexuality and Marriage*

Holland argues that Christianity has impressed upon our values regarding marriage and sexuality in various ways. He posits that seemingly innate values such as the right to choose one’s partner, and to base that choice on romantic love, grow out of medieval applications of Christian canon law.<sup>44</sup>

The situation in which St Paul writes is acquainted with homoeroticism, and widespread practice by males in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Roman world.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 360. ‘Spinoza’s genius was to turn strategies that Luther and Calvin had deployed against popery on Christianity itself.’

<sup>43</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 431.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Opening up before the Christian people was the path to a radical new conception of marriage: one founded on mutual attraction, on love. Inexorably, the rights of the individual were coming to trump those of the family. Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 267.’

<sup>45</sup> Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter Ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 14.

Indeed, Paul's thoroughly Jewish categorising of such acts 'that parodied the natural order'<sup>46</sup> would have been novel to a gentile audience.<sup>47</sup> A sound tradition of Christian scholarship has read Paul's coining of the term *arsenokoitai* as prohibiting all male-male erotic behaviour.<sup>48</sup> Concurrently, this has been a view supported widely in both Western and Eastern Christian tradition.<sup>49</sup> And yet, Holland demonstrates historically that the evolving and debatable nature of key terms such as 'sodomy' within Christianity, laid the tracks for the possibility of ambiguity in its ethical stance on the issue.<sup>50</sup> And Holland is no revisionist. He acknowledges 'the notion that men or women might be defined sexually by their attraction to people of the same gender remained too novel' for the writers of the New Testament.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, he argues that sexual appetite was always regarded with 'suspicion and anxiety' in Christianity, which is why Paul sought to channel it in a single direction.<sup>52</sup> But he must be praised for bringing serious nuance to this issue, albeit the discussion would have benefitted from expansion. In chapter twenty-one, which is devoted to the concept of modern 'wokeness', and commenting on recent US culture wars Holland writes:

If opponents of abortion were the heirs of Macrina, who had toured the rubbish tips of Cappadocia looking for abandoned infants to rescue, then those who argued against them were likewise drawing on deeply rooted Christian supposition: that every woman's body was her own, and to be respected as such by every man. Supporters of gay marriage were quite as influenced by the Church's enthusiasm for monogamous fidelity as those against it were by biblical condemnations of men who slept with men.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 273.

<sup>47</sup> Craig A. Evans, Stanley E. Porter Ed., *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> J. Glen Taylor, 'The Bible and Homosexuality' *Themelios*, Volume 21 Issue 1 October 1995, 4-9, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Traditional Christianity, with its very clear teaching that sexual relations are only to be experienced within the marriage of one man and one woman, even though this teaching has not always been practiced very thoroughly—or sometimes at all—by people claiming to be Christians, is nevertheless comparable to a nearly 2,000-year-old multicultural experiment, with non-Christian cultures functioning as the control groups. It is based on Scriptures written by many people from very different cultures over hundreds of years.' Mary S. Ford, 'By Whose Authority? Sexual Ethics, Postmodernism and Orthodox Christianity', *Christian Bioethics*, 26(3), 2020, 298–324, 317.

<sup>50</sup> Holland notes the term 'sodomy' most often used had a broad scope of meaning in early church history, even stretching to general immorality, and it wasn't until Aquinas that it was finally defined as same-sex intercourse. Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 273.

<sup>51</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 275.

<sup>52</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 520.

<sup>53</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 514.

Holland here juxtaposes what seems to be impossible bedfellows, on opposite sides of the LGBTQ and abortion debates, contending that they are essentially both arguing from deeply Christian first principles. Of course, the traditionalist position, opposing same sex marriage and transgender acquiescence can appeal to the longstanding Christian practice of restraining desire as a virtue and bulwark against sin.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Christian writers such as Rod Dreher forcefully reject the idea of gay rights as a Christian outgrowth, arguing that its' success as a movement is 'because the Christian cosmology has dissipated in the mind of the West'.<sup>55</sup> We are now circling in on the heart of the matter- what is really meant by 'Christian', and can an affirmation of LGBTQ issues properly belong within its orbit? It seems there are two key issues in answering this question. One would be the rubric of confessional affirmation, historically recognised, as being essential to authentic Christianity. Secondly, the ethical disposition that such a confession informs in one's life.<sup>56</sup> More succinctly, systematic and practical theology, respectively.

A great deal of the complexity in dealing with this issue is, as Holland argues, the very concept of 'sodomy' has not been fixed or consistently defined in all eras of church history. In her book on this issue Bridget Eileen Rivera argues that the modern concept of homosexuality owes more to Freudian frameworks than honest biblical exegesis.<sup>57</sup> Rivera makes the case that given the data and evidence of psychological harm experienced by such groups in traditional Christian spaces, they by definition are the 'least of these' whom Christ would affirm and love.<sup>58</sup> To conclude this portion, it seems simply anachronistic and untenable

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<sup>54</sup> David F Wells, *Losing Our Virtue- Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 53. Wells argues that moral boundaries have been on an expansionist crusade all through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with devastating consequences. Problematically, Wells' approach leans to romanticising a golden age of politics, public morality and virtue, particularly in the US (p59), without critically engaging many of the unjust structures such an age held up including racial oppression.

<sup>55</sup> Rod Dreher, 'Sex After Christianity', *The American Conservative*, April 2013,

<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/sex-after-christianity/>, accessed 4.4.2022.

<sup>56</sup> Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests- Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 15. Paas makes a lovely case for Christian discipleship as constantly being receptive, and learning, in response to what ones knows and believes about the Divine.

<sup>57</sup> Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens- Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 45.

<sup>58</sup> Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens*, 18.

to make LGBTQ affirmation a shibboleth that excludes one from historic, confessional Christianity, which is the first issue. Given the constant principle of reform, and ever-widening inclusion shown in the history of Christianity, it appears perfectly plausible that this impulse in western society has grown out of the ethical foundations laid by Christianity, specifically the care of Jesus Christ for the most marginalised—which should be a guide in how we apply our theology in the West today.

*c. The Last Shall Be First — The Rise of Socialism from The Sermon on the Mount*

In contemporary discourse, it is common for the ideals of communism to be contrasted with the Christian faith, namely due to the entirely atheistic framework of Marx which gave birth to communism.<sup>59</sup> The hostility of many communist states toward practicing Christians,<sup>60</sup> and even the economic philosophy of communism are thought by some to bolster this dichotomy.<sup>61</sup> Holland however suggests there may be a closer link between these groups than is often assumed to be the case.

To unpack this, in chapter twelve Holland uses the scene of a refugee town in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, named Tabor in the Czech republic as the backdrop.<sup>62</sup> Holland sketches the contours of this Christian utopian experiment with no wages, taxes or hierarchies — and debt forgiveness for all, just as the apostles had done in Acts.<sup>63</sup> And certainly, this band

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<sup>59</sup> Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), 95. Ferry lays the groundwork by showing the phenomenological bent of much post-enlightenment thought, and addresses Marx's framework specifically: 'From the scientism of Jules Verne to the communism of Marx, passing via the nineteenth century's brand of patriotism, these grand human – all too human – utopias have all at least shared the merit (albeit a doomed merit) of attempting the impossible: resuscitating great notions without stepping outside the frame of humanity – as the Greeks did with their cosmos or the Christians with their God. Here are three ways of saving one's life, or justifying one's death, which come to the same thing, by sacrificing it for a nobler cause: whether that means the revolution, the homeland or the truths of science.' 136.

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Vorobyev, 'The New Martyrs & Confessors: A Personal Memoir of Russia's Orthodox Clergy & Elders Under Communism', *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Sep/Oct2020, Vol. 33 Issue 5, 24-31, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Doug Bandow, 'Capitalism and Christianity: The Uneasy Partnership' *International Journal on World Peace*, September 2002, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 39-55, 46. Bandow makes the helpful observation that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was appropriately coined as the 'age of politics', where the agency of the nation state was looked upon as the functional means of salvation for many.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 276-7.

<sup>63</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 276.

of Hussites fleeing the wars of the Holy Roman Empire ostensibly bore the marks of an embryonic form of communism, abetted by stern preaching against the Church's hordes of wealth and pomp. As in first century Palestine and as would happen later in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, this new idealism and zealotry has an anti-establishment and revolutionary flare.<sup>64</sup> However, as much as this community draws on the practical economic example of the apostles, history seems to show that perhaps eschatological zeal, and monastic escapism from the 'corrupt' empire may have been just as influential as a desire to share all things, for its own sake.<sup>65</sup> Fudge also notes that while historically there had been Christian assent to the idea of equality of all people, it largely did not lead to the implementation of practical social reform.<sup>66</sup> This does perhaps look as though Holland is drawing together disparate events from the Acts of the Apostles to late medieval Europe and finding direct causal links. Which begs the question, if the revolutionary force of this ethos was so strong, why it did not engender such communities and movements beforehand, or indeed more frequently? Nonetheless, Holland pays strong attention the apocalyptic dimension of this movement, and how its' clarion against the papacy begins to inspire ordinary Czech citizens to question the authority of that institution:

Meanwhile, out in the slums, the resentment was of the rich. The most popular preachers were those who condemned the wealth of monasteries adorned with gold and sumptuous tapestries and demanded a return to the stern simplicity of the early days of the Church ... the papacy, seduced by the temptation of earthly glory, had forgotten that the gospels speak most loudly to the poor, to the humble, to the suffering.<sup>67</sup>

That line, perhaps out of any in the book, ought to be somewhat sobering for the Western church, with its dual status of increasing

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas A. Fudge, "Neither mine nor thine': communist experiments in Hussite Bohemia' *Canadian Journal of History*, April 1998, Vol. 33 Issue 1, 25-47, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Fudge, "Neither mine nor thine', 28. Fudge calls the movement 'apocalyptic utopianism' and says while its influence was felt up till 1620 in Europe, it failed to produce a lasting impact on Christianity.

<sup>66</sup> Fudge, "Neither mine nor thine', 28. This is certainly one of Holland's strengths as both a novelist and a historical writer, to weave a flowing and effortless narrative out of very complex historical developments. Perhaps this means at times over-simplifying, but nevertheless charity is called for as the sheer breadth and span of history in the work demands being highly selective.

<sup>67</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 277.

irrelevance and relative comfort in its' social setting.<sup>68</sup> If anything, the Church has consistently aimed too low in its appreciation of the holistic and radical nature of Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>69</sup> It hardly seems coincidental that the period in which the Church centred around Europe has seen acute decline, has also coincided with soaring material wealth in that part of the world.<sup>70</sup> Perhaps at least partially, 'the spirit has become a vibe' as Western culture, and particularly those who are involved in shaping it,<sup>71</sup> have experienced previously untold levels of comfort and relative luxury— putting them 'far from the kingdom'- or indeed far from feeling its' revolutionary approach might be needed.<sup>72</sup> No one considers revolution while the good times are rolling. Indeed, we find not only theological and biblical support, but historical support for the idea that the 'good news' is more readily apprehended by those in difficult circumstances materially.<sup>73</sup> And this need not be always financial, such as in the Welsh revivals when social displacement from agrarian society to mining preceded a record number of conversions nationally.<sup>74</sup>

The level of convenience, ease, and pursuit of personal fulfilment as a cultural phenomenon, have at least the appearance of having filled the gap in the soul; where previously, a measure of struggle, displacement

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<sup>68</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 96. Newbigin argues that the Western church, situated in post-enlightenment culture finds itself sometimes excluded by the axiom that religion has nothing to offer in political life, but that it also benefits from relative material privilege to focus on 'saving the soul' only, a concept that would have been quite alien to the early church.

<sup>69</sup> J. M. Vorster, "'Blessed are you who are poor': Political economy under the reign of God", in *Christian Ethics and Political Economy: Markers for a developing South Africa* (Reformed Theology in Africa Series Volume 3), p9–34, AOSIS, Cape Town. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.BK220.01>, 10.

'The reign of God is spiritual and real, it is future and present, it is both eschatological and historical and it has its own justice, culture and ethic.'

<sup>70</sup> Dudley Baines, Neil Cummins, and Max-Stephan Schulze, 'Population and living standards, 1945–2005, 420. <http://neilcummins.com/Papers/BCS.pdf>, accessed 4.4.2022.

<sup>71</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 163. Trueman argues vociferously that the primary influences in the world of the performative arts are responsible for moral degradation in the culture. 'the triumph of the therapeutic that psychological man represents depends for much of its success on its cultivation and dissemination through art, whether the elite products of the surrealists or the mass-produced demotic offerings of pop culture.'

<sup>72</sup> Matt Lowe, 'Religious Revival and Social Order', University of British Columbia, October 15, 2020, 7, [http://ses.wsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Lowe\\_WelshRevival\\_v2\\_compressed.pdf](http://ses.wsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Lowe_WelshRevival_v2_compressed.pdf), accessed 19.4.2022.

<sup>73</sup> George E. Tinker, 'Blessed Are the Poor: A Theology of Solidarity with the Poor in the Two-Thirds World', *Church & Society*, 84 no 4 Mar - Apr 1994, 45-55, 50. Tinker argues that Jesus' own choice of solidarity with the poor of His society ought to be a working model for our sense of mission. One could also draw on the inference that according to Christ's teachings, wealth provides an enormous barrier to spirituality, and by contrast the absence of it makes Jesus' message more accessible. Cf Matthew 19:24.

<sup>74</sup> Matt Lowe, 'Religious Revival and Social Order', 7.

and even societal crisis led previous generations to seek the kingdom.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps it is a low-hanging target to hit out at, castigating the vapid cultural narcissism of post-modern western life.<sup>76</sup> But it seems reasonable to see a compounding effect with the evaporation of Christian belief, and a growing listlessness in the great ocean of materialism that is post-modern Western life.

But was this triumph of materialism inevitable? Holland adds further nuance here. Marx, it was thought, had provided a parallel social and economic thesis to that of Christianity; that the worker had evolved to take the place of a slave-like machine, awaiting his liberation in the next phase of economic evolution when capitalism would surely collapse.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Marx was consistent in his claims the man is primarily phenomenological, rather than spiritual.<sup>78</sup> The only problem with this theory, which Holland explicates, is that the morality of Marx's theories were anything but cold hard science:

From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. Here was a slogan with the clarity of a scientific formula. Except, of course, that it was no such thing. Its line of descent was evident to anyone familiar with the Acts of the Apostles ... For a self-professed materialist, he was oddly prone to seeing the world as the Church Fathers had once done: as a battleground between cosmic forces of good and evil.<sup>79</sup>

If anything, it could be argued Holland does not push this thesis far enough. He does a very comprehensive job of showing the Christian trail that leads back from Marx, to the early modern, medieval, and early church era. But noticing Marx is operating under Christian assumptions about morality is to scratch the surface, and those who would say

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<sup>75</sup> For clarity, this is not to say the Gospel cannot and has not flourished in instances of widespread comfort. But it is to draw down on Christ's own maxim, 'Blessed are the Poor', and indeed the parable of the tares where the cares of the world choke out the concerns of the soul.

<sup>76</sup> Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 163. Trueman here has an excellent insight about 'psychological man' (meaning post-modern Western individuals), that they are essentially plastic in their approach—believing they may shape and re-shape their identity according to whatever their chosen image is, and that this dogma is galvanised by late capitalism, where the consumer is king.

<sup>77</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 438.

<sup>78</sup> Ruud Welten (2005) *From Marx To Christianity, And Back*, *Bijdragen*, 66:4, 415-431, 419.

<sup>79</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 440-441.

Christianity and Marxism have no converging lines show a paucity of theological thinking.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, as Kuyper's reformed political theology demonstrates, it is a perfectly Christian and noble aim to work for economic fairness and liberty across the various spheres of output in our society.<sup>81</sup> Not only can we trace a historical line of influence from Jesus to Marx, as Holland does, but a robust theology of common grace as espoused by Bavinck would surely accommodate that a seed of truth, which seeks the flourishing of mankind, may well germinate even in one as professedly hostile to the Christian God as Marx.<sup>82</sup> To sum up this reflection, perhaps Christian suspicion of Marx and his doctrines have created unnecessary suspicion of axioms the Church should heartily embrace as perfectly aligned to its own ethical teaching—the last shall indeed be first and the Church ought to work towards it.

#### *d. Eschatology*

### **Building the Eternal City — Hope**

The author of the book of Hebrews, commenting on the pilgrimage of Abraham writes that he was 'looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God'.<sup>83</sup> This practice of looking forward with eschatological hope, passed into Western political and cultural thought from the middle ages onwards.<sup>84</sup> The hope of an eternal and just kingdom on earth is professed from the days of the apostles, to the Cappadocian fathers, and into the middle ages without losing any fervency.<sup>85</sup> Notably, much of the apocalyptic fervency in Abrahamic religion has historically led to asceticism and extreme

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<sup>80</sup> Andrew C Stout, 'Communism, Calvinism, And Common Grace: Reflecting On Marxism And Christianity', *Presbyterian*, 47 No 1 Spr 2021, 155-164, 159.

<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, 'Kuyper and Politics', *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A twenty First Century Reading Of Kuyper's Stone Lectures*, Jessica R. Joursta & Robert J. Joursta ed., (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2022), 76.

<sup>82</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 319.

'His common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality, and law, but also in the religions. Calvin rightly spoke of a "seed of religion," a "sense of divinity." Founders of religion, after all, were not imposters or agents of Satan but men who, being religiously inclined, had to fulfil a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples.'

<sup>83</sup> Hebrews 11:10 (NIV).

<sup>84</sup> Mayte Green-Mercado, 'Speaking the End Times: Early Modern Politics and Religion from Iberia to Central Asia.', *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient*. 2018, Vol. 61 Issue 1/2, 1-17, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 151.

withdrawal from society.<sup>86</sup> But focussing on the determination of 16<sup>th</sup> century friar Cajetan, Holland highlights a distinctly optimistic approach to eschatology which he argues shaped Western political thought:

The Kingdoms of the Indians were legitimate states ... that neither kings nor emperors, nor the Church itself had any right to ordain their conquest; here, in Cajetan's opinion, were the principles fit to govern a globalised age. There was, in this innovative programme of international law, a conscious attempt to lay the foundations of something enduring.<sup>87</sup>

Holland illustrates this turn towards an enduring and lasting vision by citing the vast building projects begun by the Church at his time.<sup>88</sup> And indeed this view was not without precedent. As Tom Wright demonstrates, Jewish apocalyptic thought as the predecessor, was rather good at infusing theological meaning into the present political reality, as opposed to a kind of gnostic escapism.<sup>89</sup> Just as was seen with the value judgements of Marx, such a view also depends on a constant striving towards future redemption, an inbuilt, hopefully eschatology.<sup>90</sup> Moltmann develops this work further, and finds an utterly Messianic quality to seeking a sense of liberation and justice in the present world:

The power of history is exercised by the mighty... the messianic interpretation sees 'the moment' that interrupts time, and lets us pause in the midst of progress, as the power for conversion... God's messianic future wins power over the present. New perspectives open up. The deadliness of progress towards the economic, ecological, nuclear and genetic catastrophes is recognised ... I should like to call this the redemption of the future from the power of history.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Mayte Green-Mercado, 'Speaking the End Times', 5.

<sup>87</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 293.

<sup>88</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 293.

<sup>89</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament And The People of God: Volume 1 (Christian Origins and the Question of God series)* (London: SPCK, 1995), 286. 'Complex, many-layered and often biblical imagery is used and reused to invest the space-time events of Israel's past, present and future with their full theological significance.'

<sup>90</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, trans., Margaret Kohl, *The Coming of God – Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM, 1996), 38-39. 'All generations seek their own happiness, and in this search wait for their redemption from transience. Past generations wait for the generations to come, and for their 'messianic power'.

<sup>91</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 45-46.

Moltmann thoroughly develops the eschatological impulse that Holland has noticed running through Christendom and making its present felt in the current political order of the West — the conviction that we ought to strive for a just and peaceful settlement internationally.<sup>92</sup> Not only are Christian ethics thoroughly ingrained in Western thought, but so too is Christian apocalypse, in the sense of striving towards an eternal and just city, that bears the marks of the ideal society.

### **The Coming Judgment — Fear**

But it is perhaps the spectre of a day or reckoning, which most overtly links Christian apocalypse with Western culture. A salient example is how Holland describes the ardent striving of Maximilien Robespierre during the French Revolution:

Good and evil locked in a climactic battle, the entire world at stake; the damned compelled to drink the wine of wrath; a new age replacing the old: here were the familiar contours of apocalypse. When, demonstrating that its justice might reach even into the grave, the revolutionary government ordered the exhumation of the royal necropolis at Saint-Denis, the dumping of royal corpses into lime pits was dubbed by those who had commissioned it the Last Judgement.<sup>93</sup>

There are two aspects here present in the French Revolution which Holland helpfully teases out. One is the collective impulse that moral reform, or ‘cleansing’ must take place.<sup>94</sup> Secondly, is the sense of a final epoch, a ‘last day’ which is approaching that necessitates preparation.<sup>95</sup> And of course, a brief foray into the artistic imagination of contemporary popular culture shows this fascination hasn’t gone anywhere; print and visual media are replete with stories of earth’s

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<sup>92</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 494. Here Holland highlights the striving for equality for all before the law of the UN, as a menace to Islamic apocalyptic vision, further demonstrating that these values are far from universal, or self-evident across all times and cultures.

<sup>93</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 387.

<sup>94</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 387. Holland amusingly compares Robespierre’s passion for reform with Luther’s, a comparison he would surely despise!

<sup>95</sup> Albeit the difference here is that the ‘philosophes’ of the Revolution so scorn this idea, they decide to take it upon themselves to execute it. But the point stands that the very framework is intensely reminiscent of Christian eschatology.

destruction, natural disasters, zombies overrunning the earth, collisions with space objects, nuclear winters and totalitarian hellscape—many tracing a line directly to biblical narratives and ideas.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps, it may be helpful to offer a comment on how these twin impulses have taken their seats in the modern West. Self-evidently the West is far from the Robespierrean urge to enact biblical wrath and exterminate entire classes of people, however depraved they may be deemed. It may be fairly said that Christian values have become so embedded that even our worst criminals are generally served with the basic dignities of life. What Western society might reflect now, however, is a continuing commitment to apocalyptic thought, but with uncertainty as to where to ground it. If the grounding Christian ideal is to work now because the end approaches, what should we work for? Care for the poor, or racial or women's or transexual rights? Or does the climate debate strike such an alarm the rest are irrelevant? Indeed, to push this further, our cultures fascination with art and film that depicts the end may betray that sense of disorientation. Specifically, and to develop on Holland's thesis here—there may indeed be a strong link between our being untethered from our Christian moorings and doomsday obsessions. A lack of grounding may be posited to heighten the sense that the end could be coming for us all indiscriminately— a spectre that seems all the more terrible as we are unmoored from our culture's founding narrative and belief structure.

## **2 IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION**

### **Does Christianity have anything left to offer once its ethical norms have become embedded in society?**

#### *a. Human Rights*

Holland's historical narrative does more than simply point to a great deal of Christian influence on Western norms. He demonstrates that the culture has left faith behind.<sup>97</sup> He also claims that the kneading of

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<sup>96</sup> Mervyn F. Bendle, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination and Popular Culture', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (Vol. 11, Fall 2005), 1-8, 5.

<sup>97</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 479.

Christian ethics into the very fabric of the West, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has had the effect of somewhat obscuring the mission and message:

Like dust particles so fine as to be invisible to the naked eye, they were breathed in equally by everyone: believers, atheists, and those who never paused so much as to think about religion.<sup>98</sup>

Holland uses an effective vignette to demonstrate this, looking at the unironic message of John Lennon's 'Imagine', with its painful lack of self-awareness about borrowing heavily Christian assumption to postulate about the bliss of no belief.<sup>99</sup>

Again and again, Christians had found themselves touched by God's Spirit; again and again they had found themselves brought by it into the light. Now, though, the Spirit had taken on a new form. No longer Christian, it had become a vibe. Not to get down with it was to be stranded on the wrong side of history. The concept of progress, unyoked from the theology that had given it birth, had begun to leave Christianity trailing in its wake.<sup>100</sup>

The sacral has been overtaken by the secular. A holy temple replaced with a giant luxurious and comfortable room for opining about peace and love. And it wasn't only John Lennon who seemed blissfully unaware of his Christian suppositions: 'The trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people's morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed to even detect their presence'.<sup>101</sup>

On the face of it, if Holland's thesis is correct here, it is terrible news for churches in the West, particularly for a faith that has mission at its very heart.<sup>102</sup> Census data in Scotland confirms that between 2001 and 2011 those identifying with the national church were overtaken by those who

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<sup>98</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 479.

<sup>99</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 480.

<sup>100</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 479.

<sup>101</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 517. Holland here is reflecting on the very Christian theme of a call to repentance demonstrated at the Detroit Women's March in 2017. He goes on to argue there would be no contemporary concept of 'woke' without these very Christian ideals and assumptions.

<sup>102</sup> Timothy James Davy, 'The Book of Job and the Mission of God: An Application of a Missional Hermeneutic to the Book of Job' PhD Diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2014, 30. Davy states that mission 'is not simply one of many themes the Bible touches upon but, rather, is constitutive of the very nature of the Bible'. [This, of course, is based on Wright's *Mission of God*.]

do not have any religious affiliation.<sup>103</sup> Scotland particularly, appears to be hit hard by the secularising trend, with an estimated projected Christian population of under 6% in most of Scotland by 2025.<sup>104</sup> Is this an outright assault, simple erosion over time, or a great opportunity for evangelism?

In Europe, Paas notes that ‘in this profoundly secularized environment, people do not even bother to be atheists’.<sup>105</sup> In the UK context at least, there is some evidence to suggest the decline is driven more by apathy and seeming irrelevance, than hostility.<sup>106</sup> This would harmonise with Holland’s claim that people’s Christian assumptions have become imperceptible to them, and thus they have happily assumed the ethical tenets, but see no need to go further.<sup>107</sup> There is no perceived need to seek out the dogma, particularly being awash in a culture of anti-supernatural bias, making previous structures and approaches to evangelism untenable.<sup>108</sup> Is this a cul-de-sac for Christianity in the West? Of course not, we may say — the Church uniquely has salvation to offer, as it always has, and needs to unapologetically return to the task of that proclamation and worship.<sup>109</sup> This is simply a matter of the Church’s self-confidence.<sup>110</sup> But this view risks not only a kind of gnostic (an inherently sub-Christian) focus on souls, but it is also tone deaf to the cultural situation it is surrounded by.

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<sup>103</sup>Scotland’s Census- Religion, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/census-results/at-a-glance/religion/>, accessed 18.02.2022.

<sup>104</sup> Scottish Church Census, 2016, <https://saintthomas.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=217905>, accessed 18.02.2022. This data highlights that a lot of the stemming the tide in decline has occurred through growth in Immigrant churches, particularly Catholic and Pentecostal.

<sup>105</sup> Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Howard David Ingham, ‘The Unimportance of Being Earnest’, *Room 207 Press*, <https://www.room207press.com/2021/04/the-unimportance-of-being-earnest.html>, accessed 18.02.2022. Ingham tells the story of his own deconversion, humorously, through the tale of an increasingly failing Christian Union evangelism week.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Like dust particles so fine as to be invisible to the naked eye, they were breathed in equally by everyone: believers, atheists, and those who never paused so much as to think about religion’.  
Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 479.

<sup>108</sup> Paul E. Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission* (California: William Carey International Press, 2009), 319.

<sup>109</sup> Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 25.

<sup>110</sup> Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 26. Paas does an excellent job of displaying various responses across the theological spectrum to the very idea of being missional in the West, and gently points out the deficiencies in each view. Here he takes the view that this approach is somewhat egocentric, and dualistic-focus on souls to the exclusion of all else.

Conversely, a purely historical, and naturalist reading of the issue may go something like this: Christianity was a radical movement and had an enormous transformative effect on culture, for the good. But given its reliance on antiquated myths, and the advance of scientific knowledge, humanity has simply outgrown its need for the myths, and will go on happily making progress with the ethical residual.<sup>111</sup> In short, the faith has lost cultural clout, and relevance. Paas has an insightful observation that the loss of cultural power can however be helpful to mission, by driving a focus on what is critical rather than peripheral:

Secularization and the loss of cultural power tend to burn away all minor debates; they are great tools to help us concentrate on core issues and forget about everything marginal. There are no ways to keep the 'world' at a distance or under control.<sup>112</sup>

Paas is making an argument about the very posture which mission should take today in the West as much as anything. Do we still pretend we occupy the seat or centre of cultural power, or wistfully long for a world in which that is the case? Or do we acknowledge a marginalisation that allows us to rethink, and perhaps even ask better questions of our post-Christian culture to engage it?

Positively, Christianity can offer a hope to re-ground the unity of humanity. While embers of this belief still glow in in Western culture,<sup>113</sup> there is yet plenty of tribalism to go around. The brotherhood of all mankind continues to be a belief laden with value judgement. Bavinck writes 'for however great the difference between races may be, upon deeper investigation the unity and kinship of all people nevertheless emerges all the more clearly'.<sup>114</sup> Bavinck here grounds his argument in the fact that a belief in humanity grounded in naturalism, or indeed

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<sup>111</sup> NB- This is emphatically *not* to say this is Holland's view, and no words are being put in his mouth here. This is simply an attempt to take his thesis to the next logical conclusion, viewed from out with a Christian supposition, to try and test if we may, the value of continuing Christian mission with as much rigour as possible.

<sup>112</sup> Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 16.

<sup>113</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 481. Holland offers the 1980s Band Aid effort as an example of the Christian idea of the brotherhood of all mankind at work.

<sup>114</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 2, 526.

purely Darwinism, is liable to have differences between races sharply contrasted, leading to damaging anthropology such as that of Nietzsche.<sup>115</sup> Of course, that is not to say Christianity has not had to reckon with anthropologies constructed from within that have been abhorrent. But to return to Holland, given that a 'brotherhood of humanity' is an unquestioned assumption now in the West, there is fertile ground for driving that deeper, with a strong philosophical grounding in the God who created all equal, as 'priests' of a good creation.<sup>116</sup> For example, in our current climate debate and crisis, there is somewhat of a vacuum, even amidst the most vociferous of campaigning, as to the 'why' the planet must be saved. Christianity has always had the resources of sense-making or indeed purpose forming when it comes to caring for planet and responsible use of its resources. It has an enormously high premium on the creation itself, and the value of human life because they are imbued with the reflection and image of the Almighty.

Furthermore, none of humanity's attempts at utopia have ever materialised.<sup>117</sup> This can be demonstrated empirically as well as philosophically: 'If anything is certain, it is that sin is not an accidental phenomenon in the life of individuals, but a state and manner of life involving the whole human race, a property of human nature', writes Bavinck.<sup>118</sup> Bosch notes, in keeping with Holland's thesis, that modernity didn't give up on the idea of salvation, the focus simply shifted to humanity as the agent.<sup>119</sup> And Christianity itself has not been immune from this impulse. Indeed certain strands Christian theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century attempted to make the humanitarian and social ideals of Christ the central idea, as opposed to the historic focus of either cosmic redemption or substitutionary atonement.<sup>120</sup> Essentially, this

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<sup>115</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 2, 526. Of course, a line can be drawn from the anthropological work of Darwin, Nietzsche and the atrocities of Nazi Germany in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>116</sup> William Edger, *Created & Creating- A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 165.

<sup>117</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics vol 3- Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 87.

<sup>118</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics vol 3- Sin and Salvation in Christ*, 88.

<sup>119</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission- Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 405.

<sup>120</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 405.

could be construed as a crisis of salvation—what do we really need saved from, and for? And where do we ultimately place our hope for redemption? To be sure, an overly narrow definition of salvation as ‘soul-escape’ is not remotely the whole counsel of God.<sup>121</sup> There is rather a unity in Christian teaching between soul and body, matter and spirit, that cannot be separated. But so too, is there calamity in characterising redemption on purely horizontal, human terms, as Bosch explains:

Unchecked technological development has become nonsensical since Earth’s non-renewable resources are being exhausted, while the rich become richer and the poor become poorer... We have, in addition, become conscious of the real possibility that our technological and scientific know-how may lead to irreversibly ruining our eco-system.<sup>122</sup>

It’s not so much despite our great progressive leaps of problems we still have the human plight, but indeed in many cases because of them. We are stuck with original sin, however it may be defined — but its fruit is ever clear to see. As this is being written, troops are stationed all along the Russian Ukrainian border threatening a catastrophic global conflict, with the shadow of the Cold War beginning to loom once again. Energy bills, food prices and fuel bills are set to cripple UK families throughout the year. The world is reeling from a global respiratory virus, exacerbated by almost every turn by human malfeasance and incompetence. To whom shall we look for deliverance?

Bosch proposes that a narrow focus on salvation has been a barrier to mission and a ‘comprehensive Christological framework’ is needed.<sup>123</sup> A rejection of the doctrine that man can ‘save himself’, must be coupled with an earnest working to end oppression as those who serve the God

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<sup>121</sup> Tom Wright, *Simply Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2007), 165.

This is the point at which we modern westerners are called to make a huge leap of the imagination. We have been buying our mental furniture for so long in Plato’s factory that we have come to take for granted a basic ontological contrast between ‘spirit’ in the sense of something immaterial and ‘matter’ in the sense of something material, solid, ‘physical’.

<sup>122</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 407.

<sup>123</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 409. The Patristic fathers favoured Christ’s origin and being as the locus of salvation, Western missionaries classically focussed on Christ’s death and redemption, and 20<sup>th</sup> century theology majored on Christ’s life and ethical teaching.

‘who will wipe every tear away’.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps, we have forgotten Kuyper’s insight that we must embrace the human culture we have been set in, and remember we have the great gift to offer of ‘direct and immediate communion with the Living God’.<sup>125</sup> To put it simply, we must become re-enchanted with what we are saved for, not going to Heaven, but the thrill of seeing Christ’s Lordship over all things, and inviting others into that adventure, here on earth.<sup>126</sup>

### *b. Return to the Supernatural*

‘That church leaders in Europe seemed to have stopped believing in the reality of the demonic was their problem, not his,’ writes Holland about a charismatic 1970s Lusaka bishop, straining against the evident rationalism of his European counterparts.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps one of the most simultaneously insightful and controversial themes in Holland’s thesis is that Christianity in the West possessed the seeds of its own destruction. He notes that the turn to rationalism, and repudiation of superstition<sup>128</sup> by the Dutch philosopher Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was to ‘turn the strategies that Luther and Calvin had deployed against popery on Christianity itself.’<sup>129</sup> And for our purposes, whether it was the ideals of the Reformation which engendered this change, we are left with the undeniable reality that Enlightenment thinking has become dominant in the West. Particularly, a tendency to see all religious belief and practice as a separate and optional part of life, which may be tacked onto our ‘real’ experience which is guided by reason and science.<sup>130</sup> However, it is hardly as though this epistemology has quenched the longings of every human being. For one thing, the themes of redemption, salvation, and hope for the cosmos seem to be ineradicable in the media and

<sup>124</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 410.

<sup>125</sup> Richard J. Mouw, ‘Kuyper and Life Systems’ *Calvinism for a Secular Age: A twenty First Century Reading Of Kuyper’s Stone Lectures*, Jessica R. Joursta & Robert J. Joursta ed., (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2022), 19.

<sup>126</sup> Richard J. Mouw, ‘Kuyper and Life Systems’, 15.

<sup>127</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 484.

<sup>128</sup> For clarity, here Superstition is used to collate all previous epochs of the supernaturally minded church (including prayer, miracles etc) whereas previously the Reformers had used the term to castigate certain Roman Catholic practices such as The Mass, Rosary etc.

<sup>129</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 361.

<sup>130</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1978), 32.

stories we consume.<sup>131</sup> Indeed, we could argue that universal strivings continue, such as ‘the quest for affirmation of one’s life, for salvation, and for hope’.<sup>132</sup> And if this is the case that such striving still takes place, it must follow that the Christian gospel and story, has some potential to quench the meaning-seeking thirst in our society.<sup>133</sup>

The question then is precisely what to do in search of a means of connecting such impulses to the story of Christianity. One of the most relevant (and current) datasets in the UK for this question is Stephen Hance’s 2021 study of social attitudes toward the Church of England. One of the most striking conclusions in his survey was that people thought ‘the Church seems very embarrassed to talk about God ... One participant wondered aloud if we have stopped really believing in God and have decided to prioritize good works instead’.<sup>134</sup> Adding to this alarming reflection, was the general sense that the national church in England has a rather anaemic ‘soft-left’ stance in terms of its public engagement on the issues of the day. It has been observed by various scholars that the Church is numerically growing more now in the Global South than in the West. Various reasons are posited for this shift. Samuel Deresa, having spent time in both cultures suggests it is the Global South’s ‘emphasis on evangelism, which is the proclamation of the gospel by all Christians to all people’ which makes the key difference.<sup>135</sup> He goes on to note however, the relations between church and society, and discipleship strategies are somewhat lacking in the Global South.<sup>136</sup> Certainly, in terms of community integration, the Western church and particularly the UK, often have strong roots, and much goodwill from the public, which it would be foolish not to seek to

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<sup>131</sup> Derek J Fiedler, ‘The Mandalorian, The Nativity, and The Seed of Hope’, *The Symbolic World Blog*, <https://thesymbolicworld.com/articles/the-mandalorian-the-nativity-and-the-seed-of-hope/>, accessed 5.4.2022.

<sup>132</sup> Wessel Stoker, *Is the Quest for Meaning the Quest For God* (Rodopi: Atlanta, 1996), 169. Stoker does make a considered argument that meaning is possible without God. But he is quoted here in support of the premise that meaning is still broadly sought by most people, whatever conclusion they arrive at.

<sup>133</sup> Isaiah 51:1-2. This text has a lovely flourish to it when considered through a post-modern lens of existential drift, and indeed surrounded by the vagaries and failures of the free market economy.

<sup>134</sup> Stephen Hance, *Seeing Ourselves As Others See Us: Perceptions of The Church of England* (Ridley, Grove Books, 2021), 19.

<sup>135</sup> Samuel Yonas Deressa, ‘The Shift of Christianity to the Global South and the Need for Discipleship and Church Health’, *Word & World*, 40 no 4 Fall 2020, 363-373, 371.

<sup>136</sup> Samuel Yonas Deressa, ‘The Shift of Christianity’, 371.

capitalise on.<sup>137</sup> To come back to Holland's observation that the Church has become somewhat de-mystified, perhaps a turn the Western church should now take to re-discover its own strangeness in a post-modern world, even at the risk of being called superstitious. It is likely that not only people are longing for transcendence but may even privately think they are experiencing it and would wish to discuss and make sense of these experiences in community.<sup>138</sup> A basic Christian presupposition in the New Testament is that God is at work in people's lives and souls, but too often in late modernity the Church has downplayed its unique vocation in favour of social work. Reflecting on the various approaches to missional engagement in the last century Sŭng-o An writes:

The goal of mission has been changed from saving souls to making the world a good place to live. As a result, the mission that makes the world a better place, not the mission that evangelizes the world, has been recognized as a mission that meets the will of God. This kind of mistake can occur when the Church seeks the goal of mission directly from God without seeing Jesus.<sup>139</sup>

To return to where we started, the fascinating story of Christianity in the West which Holland charts only took place due to some fantastic encounters with a man named Jesus. Perhaps the Church ought to hope, evangelise, and organise as if they expect that people will continue to have those, regardless of the shape which they take. And indeed take risks regarding overall perception—to the point of seeming utterly strange in a de-supernaturalised culture.

### *c. Laying Down Our Arms*

In this final strand of implications to be considered from Holland's thesis, we start with the radical picture with which he opens his thesis:

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<sup>137</sup> Stephen Hance, *Seeing Ourselves As Others See Us*, 10.

<sup>138</sup> Andy Root, Nick Shepherd, 'People have weird experiences — let's create places they can talk about them', Church Times 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/3-january/features/features/people-have-weird-experiences-let-s-create-places-they-can-talk-about-them>, accessed 5.4.2022.

<sup>139</sup> Sŭng-o An, 'An Alternative Mission Paradigm for Healthy Church Growth', *Great Commission Research Journal*, 10 no 2 Spr 2019, 8-29, 24.

That such a god, of all gods, might have had a son, and that this son, suffering the fate of a slave, might have been tortured to death on a cross, were claims as stupefying, as they were, to most Jews, repellent.<sup>140</sup>

One of the great strengths of Holland's work, from the Church's point of view, is to have our story reflected to us from outside the gates of our ecclesial city, by a historian telling a compelling narrative. What was striking to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, and to Holland today, ought to confront us afresh. How did a Jewish peasant two thousand years ago forever change history by his ignoble death? One reasonable answer is that He laid aside his power, and we ought to do the same.

The history which Holland has charted above is one where, ironically, the Church in the West rose to occupy the very seat of civil and political power, often abusing it.<sup>141</sup> But a re-assessment of our relationship to power is a deeply Christian ethic, as our public consciousness is currently reminding us via movements such as Black Lives Matter and MeToo. There are many granular ways this can take shape, from more robust safeguarding, advocating for the abused within church and creating a culture where abuse of power and people is seen as anathema. In recent days some of the most popular expressions of the Church in the West have been exposed once again to be both obsessed with celebrity and a haven for dangerous abusers, the two often going hand in hand.<sup>142</sup> But perhaps, at the societal level, the Church must learn the way of the Saviour once again, build up further trust and goodwill without assuming any cultural power. Indeed, given the damage done by the Church's own abuse of power, it stands to reason it should take a significant shift, and possibly significant time, for

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<sup>140</sup> Tom Holland, *Dominion*, xviii.

<sup>141</sup> In Chapter twenty-one, Holland deals with the dark underbelly of child abuse in the Catholic Church, as well as US televangelists avarice and sexual licentiousness which they would often hypocritically warn their flock about. Tom Holland, *Dominion*, 520.

<sup>142</sup> 'Ravi Zacharias Hid Hundreds of Pictures of Women, Abuse During Messages, and a Rape Allegation', Christianity Today, 11th February 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-rzim-investigation-sexual-abuse-sexting-rape.html>, accessed 5.4.2021.

a high level of trust to be instilled in her enough that people will care about the message.<sup>143</sup>

It strikes me that the image Holland opens with has two enduringly startling aspects—the audacious idea that this is authentically the Son of God, and further that He has come to make himself vulnerable and available to the ‘stinking toiling masses’. And it seems to follow that for the Church to continue its mission, in any age but particularly ours, we must follow in continuing to unashamedly seek to represent God as seen in Christ and do so in as vulnerable and non-threatening a way as Christ Himself— particularly in a culture weary of sales pitches, fake products, and predatory advertising.<sup>144</sup>

### **Christ Is Risen, and Online — A Short Post Script**

In looking to draw these final implications together, I offer a small fragment of life on the frontlines of parish ministry, trying fervently to continue the Church’s mission during a global pandemic. Hance noted in his study the fact that online platforms had resulted in genuine spiritual connection for the Church.<sup>145</sup> This too has been my experience. Not only were many of us forced to put all our worship ‘out there’ via a dedicated stream, but we also found to our amazement new followers as people could ‘shop around’ with little risk compared to showing up on a Sunday morning. More than that, emerging generations are spending increasing proportions of time online, and looking to online ‘feeds’ for most of their information and formation (podcasts, social media, and online communities). Some platforms such as Discord, focus on community and relationship building through common interest, while TikTok rewards creators who make authentic and original content that is valuable to the users. By simply ‘showing up’ on the latter, offering brief snippets of theology, humour, and bible readings, I have been able to

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<sup>143</sup> ‘Shameful’: Church of England head decries child abuse cover-up’ Reuters, October 7th 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-abuse-idUKKBN26S0TW>, accessed 5.4.2022.

<sup>144</sup> George. R. Aldhizer IV, ‘Christianity and Consumer Culture: Theology As Resistance and Response’ *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 40 no 1 Spr 2016, 51-68.

<sup>145</sup> Stephen Hance, *Seeing Ourselves as Others See Us*, 12.

connect with a diverse online community. It includes atheists, committed Christians, new Christians, wiccans, Muslims, ex-evangelicals, spiritual seekers, and those who have been deeply hurt by church. It has given birth to an online Bible study, as well as regular 'live Q and A' sessions that help build community and add to our weekly service viewership. But it does beg the question, in a post-Christian society, what is it that is particularly efficacious about these emerging platforms for the message?

Here I simply seek to draw together my two final points regarding the supernatural and laying aside power. One of the by-products of Western society's individualism is surely our fragmentation. Parish church life struggles just as many community organisations struggle in a post-modern world of increasing individualism. And it may be said the smartphone is the very nadir of that phenomenon. It delivers almost a completely personalised experience to every user at almost every interaction—our apps, news and social feeds can all be totally curated to our tastes. We also spend ever increasing amounts of time on these devices.<sup>146</sup> It seems to me perfectly reasonable that for many 'end users' now, if they wish to explore the supernatural in any way – it will be through the relative safety and comfort of their smart device as opposed to trekking out to an unknown building full of strangers. And this may be what is driving the high volume of spiritual and esoteric content on platforms like Tiktok.<sup>147</sup> It appears that the rise of 'nones' on our census forms in the West doesn't quite tell the whole story, and there are generations of spiritual seekers, looking to explore and find answers—they perhaps are just not going to look to the traditional outposts of institutional Christianity to guide them.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the shift to online in our culture is what it offers in terms of genuine connection and vulnerability.

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<sup>146</sup> 'People Devote A Third of Waking Time to Mobile Apps', BBC News, 12<sup>th</sup> January 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-59952557>, accessed 19.4.2022.

<sup>147</sup> 'Is a New Kind of Religion Forming on the Internet?', Vox, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2022, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22832827/manifesting-tiktok-astroworld-conspiracy-qanon-religion>, accessed 19.4.2022.

Certainly, the relative safety and anonymity of the screen can generate all manner of malice and depravity during interactions. But the tech gods seem to be learning that many more people are finding their community online and would like a safe space to do so. Again, TikTok poises itself against other platforms by rewarding creators who 'show up', are their authentic selves, and create high quality content that their community finds engaging. The pandemic has driven not only more users, but many more types of creators onto such online platforms. That impetus to be authentic, in turn leaves users feeling as though they can open up and be vulnerable. To return to my central point, that we must continue to facilitate spaces where people can have encounters with the risen Christ- surely as Christians we hold that there is no more powerful or vulnerable an experience for someone. Putting this altogether, it is only logical that increasingly, if Western individuals wish to both explore and pursue such an interest in the person of Jesus, that they will opt increasingly to do a great deal of that online, where they can explore and be vulnerable.

The shift to online has presented opportunities for mission, but obviously it alone is not the answer to all of Western Christianity's woes. From experience, however, it can at least be said that people continue to seek spiritual nourishment, and if the Church makes herself vulnerable, and available to people's questions and experience, the mission of Christ can certainly continue in our culture.

## CONCLUSION

Tom Holland clearly delivers a well-written history of Christianity in the West through a compelling narrative. Forensic in detail, but also broad enough to show the sweep of Christianity's effects over two thousand years, the work is a remarkable achievement. His thesis comes at an important juncture in the West, and as has been shown, compels the Church to ask where the essence of its faith lies, and how it may hope to approach the society on its doorstep in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Beyond reasonable doubt, Christianity has been central to establishing the Western legal tradition, our championing human rights, and basic almost imperceptible beliefs about the sanctity of all human life. This demonstrably applies even to Western atheists, with few exceptions. We live in a world where we have hopes, aspirations of societal progress, and the general belief that history is moving forward towards some end point —whether utopia or catastrophe, thanks to Christianity. But the Church has enormous challenges — not only in declining numbers of Western believers but the uphill struggle against the modern gods of materialism, comfort and belief in progress which seem to render the Christian God unnecessary. We will increasingly face new challenges or opportunities online, depending on how we see and approach them.

As much as this may appear an inevitable cul-de-sac, Hollands work has been employed to show ultimately humanity cannot every be its own saviour. Indeed, one would hope anyone could see from Holland's presentation of his thesis, it is something rather other-worldly that breaks in to make our world so much better today than in ancient times, regarding both human rights and even scientific progress. If anything, it seems Holland demonstrates that there was nothing historically inevitable or indeed normative about quite the way in which the crucified King of the Jews created a revolution that our entire Western world now lives in the wake of.

I end this paper by once again circling back to Holland's startling opening gambit. However much as Christianity helps and cleans up society as the fruit of its being in our world, it all began with some individuals personally encountering one they believed to be God's promised Messiah — which forever changed *their* world. In that vein, the missional approach and hope for the Western church today must be anchored on this very point. The application of that may be different everywhere. But Holland's impressive chronology of Western Christendom outlines how adept Christianity is at settling into various historical and cultural contexts, and the West is no monolith. The epitaph to this study is surely that we may continue to have a sense of expectancy and eagerness to push into new frontiers, convinced that people continue to have encounters with the risen Jesus in diverse situations and contexts.

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