

# CHRISTENDOM IS DEAD...

## Implications of a Violent Age for Church, Mission and School

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On March 26, 2005 an English atheist named Anthony Browne wrote:

“Christians are ‘the largest single group in the world which is being denied human rights on the basis of their faith’.”<sup>1</sup>

Browne’s concern was not motivated by any desire to encourage the Christian faith. His deepest concern was the fact that the obvious double standards of the Western World would encourage the growth of “fundamentalist” Christianity. He concluded:

“If non-Christians like me can sense the nonsense, how does it make Christians feel? And how are they going to react? The Christophobes worried about rising Christian fundamentalism in Britain should understand that it is a reaction to our double standards. And as long as our double standards exist, Christian fundamentalism will grow.”<sup>2</sup>

Browne’s concern should be an encouragement to Christians of Europe battling the ravages of post-modern and post-Christian thinking. People are not as easily fooled as the media sometimes thinks they are. Even non-Christians in the west sense that the media presents only one side of the story and they can ask the questions that the media often refuses to ask. I believe we are on the cusp of a great revival.

This past summer I was in New Zealand shortly after the London metro bombings. The western world received an incredible shock that people raised in England would engage in suicide bombings against innocent civilians who had done them no harm. Shortly after these events a young man in New Zealand spray painted and broke a few windows in two mosques. This event received immediate world-wide attention. Since I was in Auckland at the time, I was able to find out about this young man. He had been in and out of mental institutions for years and was certainly not representative of any widespread movement to attack mosques in New Zealand. The previous month I had been in Indonesia and had the opportunity to tour several of the hundreds of Christian Churches that have been burned down in the past several years by mobs led by Muslim clerics. This news receives almost no attention in the western press. Nor has the forcible closing of many other Churches by Islamic organizations backed up by coercive actions. A few weeks ago three young Christian girls were beheaded in the Moluccas while walking to

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Browne, *Church of Martyrs*, The Spectator, March 26, 2005, Cover story, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Browne., p. 4.

school and a fourth was severely injured. This actually managed to receive a few notices in the western press but certainly nothing like the Auckland mosque story. In the age of the internet, however, it is not possible to cover up these atrocities by ignoring them. An increasing number of people are noting the double standards that seem to be inherent in “multiculturalism”. Ironically we have *The DaVinci Code* coming out in April advertised as the story of the “greatest cover-up in world history”. This is, of course, a total fiction. Perhaps some in the media hope we will be distracted from the real cover-up that is going on. The reaction of the Muslim world to pictures published of the Prophet Muhammad may have been a wake-up call to Western media that Islam will not lay flat for them the way Christianity has. Frankly I believe that many people in the world today are seeing the difference between Muhammad and Christ, and many, including Muslims, are deeply attracted to Jesus, who is truly “the Prince of Peace”.

These brief thoughts are only an introduction to the most important point that Browne made in his article, the fact that Christendom is dead. Browne notes:

“Even in what was, before multiculturalism, known as Christendom, Christians are persecuted. I have spoken to dozens of former Muslims who have converted to Christianity in Britain who are shunned by their community, subjected to mob violence, forced out of town, threatened with death and even kidnapped...but the police and government do nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

The realization that Christendom is dead is new only to secularists. Leonard Sweet noted in 1999 that, “Christendom is dead, and with it the institutionalized distinctions of leadership.”<sup>4</sup> Francis Schaeffer had written extensively on the post-Christian age back in the seventies. What is happening now is that the changes are explicit enough that even non-Christians can see them.

These double standards do work to our advantage.

It is clear that in the West the Christian faith must concern itself with rebuilding the structures of the Christian faith from the ground up both here and to the ends of the earth. But what sort of structures should they be? How are the Christian churches, and particularly the mission agencies to react to this new world. Further, how should Christian institutions such as schools react? We are no longer in a post-Christian age. We have entered an anti-Christian age. This paper will seek to provide some suggestions for how the structures of the Christian Church will need to adapt in this age of violence and double-standards.

Violence against Christians is to be expected. Further, we can anticipate that any Islamist violence against Christian institutions in the West will probably be blamed on the Christians. The argument will include two elements. First is the assertion that Christians are intolerant because they believe that Jesus is the only way. Barbara Walter’s recent interview with the head of the National Association of Evangelicals, emphasized his

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<sup>3</sup> Browne, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1999) p.50.

views on the uniqueness of Jesus. She asked him again and again whether non-Christians would go to hell. His statements were compared in advertisements for the show to similar statements by Hamas suicide bombers that those who do not believe in Islam will go to Hell. In post-modern, multicultural America this is the ultimate sin. Intolerant people like this deserve to be treated with intolerance. Evangelical Christians are equivalent to Islamic suicide bombers, at least in the eyes of the media.

Secondly, Christian mission is the most suspect of all evangelical institutions because it is the primary agent of Christian “intolerance”. Laurie Goodstein of the New York Times puts it this way, “Evangelicals have always believed that all other religions are wrong, but what is notable now is the vituperation”. Her attitude is that evangelicals not only believe that Jesus is the only way but worst of all they have the audacity to go out and preach it to people who are not Christians. She contrasts that attitude with the attitude of liberal denominations:

“The conservative evangelical approach to Islam is in stark contrast with the "interfaith understanding" approach of many Orthodox, Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches like the Methodists, Episcopalians and Lutherans. Since 9/11, local churches in these denominations began inviting Muslims to explain their faith at a flurry of interfaith events and dialogue sessions.”<sup>5</sup>

Time magazine’s question in 2003, “Should Christians Convert Muslims”<sup>6</sup> although presented in a fairly balanced way, clearly indicated that this kind of activity is highly suspect at best. We can expect that media attitudes concerning violence towards Christians, and particularly evangelical Christians, will continue to harden, with Christians being blamed more and more for the anger of Islam and being blamed for whatever violence is unleashed against them.

This is a new dawn for the Christian Church. We have re-entered the first century. We must come to grips with the new mentality of the Western world. We are not on friendly territory. We are going to be inexorably driven back to the methodology of Jesus and the apostles in the organization of the Church, in the work of missions and in training for ministry.

First, let us consider the organization of the Church. The first casualty of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be the mega-church movement and all glib “success” oriented Gospels. These are the most available targets in the western hemisphere for Islamic terrorists. I can’t imagine why they haven’t struck yet. It must simply be an aspect of their continued

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<sup>5</sup> Laurie Goodstein, New York Times, May 27, 2003. To be fair I must also note that even the NY Times occasionally publishes articles somewhat positive to evangelical Christian missions such as the article of January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006 by Daniel Bergner entitled “The Call”. Well worth reading.

<sup>6</sup> Time Magazine, June 30, 2003.

myopia in thinking that the western world is “Christian” so that any bomb in the West is a bomb unleashed on “Christians”. That myopia is changing. After just two or three bombings with thousands of Christians dead, these churches will evaporate along with the prosperity Christianity they represented. The one great exception will be those mega-Churches that have based their work on small group fellowships. I expect that these churches will disperse to their homes and become even more effective in their outreach.

We can expect that the media will be able to locate some so-called Christians who will make the requisite hateful comments about Islam. That will insure that the media position that Christians got just what they deserved will become the accepted theme of the main stream media. Genuine Christians will call for Christians to love Muslims, and protect them from any backlash. The media will ignore this, but Muslims will notice. And common people will notice that in spite of massive provocation, Christians are not going around bombing mosques<sup>7</sup>. Ultimately this will increase respect for the Christian church. The key is that genuine Christians must work in every way to love Muslims and to be their best protectors. Satan knows that the only way to stop the people movements of Muslims coming to Jesus is through Christian hatred of Muslims. We must insure that the world’s view of Jesus is lifted up by our behavior. Thankfully, the perception of danger in attending Church is likely to strip a lot of the useless flab off the Body of Christ in North America and in that sense will be a great blessing.

Ultimately, Osama bin Laden is our best ally in this struggle. He, and those like him, are the new great proto-evangelists for the Christian faith. He, better than anyone alive today, is illustrating the difference between Muhammad and Christ. Though the media refuses to understand this, Muslims are understanding this reality with increasing clarity. Ibn Warraq’s book “Leaving Islam” shows that while certain segments of the Muslim population are becoming radicalized, a significant portion of the Muslim world is questioning Islam as never before. But there is a paradox.

The defeat of Islamism cannot occur without an initial victory. Iran is the great paradigm of this reality. Iranians are departing the Islamic faith in a way totally unprecedented in the history of Islam. While it is true that the majority who are leaving Islam are becoming secularists, a significant number, in the tens of thousands have become Christians. It is only when Islamism has gained total power that its bankruptcy, brutality and inability to deal with modern social problems becomes evident to all. It is not for no reason that the president of Iran, Ahmadinejad has declared that he is going to put a “stop to the expansion of Christianity in Iran”. In this context he is talking about the Christian house-church movement. Numerous Christians and Christian leaders have been murdered over the years in Iran and there has been at least one pastor murdered since Ahmadinejad’s statement. Again the media ignores this but such statements clearly indicate that unprecedented things are happening.

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes it seems the media gets carried away with wishful thinking about Christians. On November 16, 2005 NBC aired a segment on the popular show “E-Ring” which portrayed a group of “Christian terrorists” taking Muslim women and children hostage in a mosque in the U.S. Of course these wicked Christians get mowed down to the last man by the American heroes in the end.

The Christian church in the west must begin to adopt the same house church structures that characterize the Church in China and the emerging Churches in the Muslim world. It is these small fellowships that will provide the bedrock for Christian fellowship, accountability, and practical ministry at the grass-roots level. It is the small churches that have always trained an inordinately large portion of Christian leadership. When I was a pastor in a small Baptist denomination in Sweden some years ago I did a private survey of the pastors in our congregations asking where they had their beginnings in ministry. An unexpectedly large percentage had their initial ministry experience as members of small churches that were dependant on lay leadership. This is because everyone needs to work in a small congregation in order for the congregation to survive. Usually most of those who work are unpaid. This becomes an excellent opportunity for developing spiritual gifts. This is the essential message of the Church Planting Movements popularized by David Garrison<sup>8</sup> and we need them as much in the West as we do in the rest of the world.

As the Church adapts to being under fire world-wide a curious and beneficial change will occur. Running to the western world for safety will no longer be an option, either for missionaries or national leaders. The potential for martyrdom will equalize across the world. Similarly, the economic differences between the nations, whether in the west or the 2/3rds world, will shrink. Christian missionaries will be forced by economic realities to live closer to the lifestyle of nationals and supporting oneself will move from the realm of option to necessity. The Western world has lost its competitive edge to China and India and with its aging population the standard of living, particularly in Europe, will inexorably decline. By the year 2100 we should see a world with much less differences in economic and developmental levels. There will, of course, be regional exceptions.

A further development is the emergence of direct relationships between Christian churches world-wide. Saddleback's PEACE initiative is the latest of such initiatives. Columbia Biblical Seminary held a seminar this past January with church leaders, mission executives and representatives of the PEACE initiative. The potential dangers of sending neophytes overseas into the complex circumstances of many two third's world nations, is well recognized. Saddleback is not unaware of these problems. However, in a globalized age relationships between churches will globalize and this is a very positive development. The reason the Indonesian Churches invited a large group of non-Indonesian neophytes to see their nation was to indicate to us what they are facing by way of persecution and suffering.<sup>9</sup> They expect that when the next wave of islamist atrocities occur, as they surely will, we will stand behind them, by contacting both media and government to point out what is happening. I met recently with the Bishop of Rwanda who has taken evangelical Episcopalian churches under his protective wing against the liberal controlled Episcopalian Church. These kinds of relationships are going to multiply worldwide and mission agencies must both adapt to and encourage this reality. They have much to offer in the interchange.

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<sup>8</sup> David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, WIGTake Resources, Virginia, 2004. See Garrison's summary on the importance of lay leadership to such movements, pp. 189-190.

<sup>9</sup> This was the recent Impact Indonesia conference which included 500 non-Indonesian Church and mission leaders.

Let us consider the structure of the mission agencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clearly the dangers of mission work have increased many-fold. We have seen an increase in the numbers of martyrs even among Western mission staff. This trend may be expected to continue. Perhaps we will begin to approach the level of danger that many evangelical missionaries faced when they went to Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then the danger was sickness, and missionaries died by the thousands. In certain areas the average life expectancy was two years. We may return to something like that level of sacrifice in the work of bringing the good news of Jesus to Muslims. Keep in mind that the rage of the Islamists is working in our favor and Muslims are turning to Jesus as never before in history. I have found Muslims to be far more open to the Gospel than western Europeans. The Islamists will increasingly seek to kidnap and kill Christian missionaries. As they do so, they will illustrate for the world the bankruptcy of their ideology. More importantly, they will drive thousands of Muslims out of Islam and into the Kingdom of God and His Christ. Whatever the cost, we must focus on taking the Gospel to the Muslim world as never before. As Greg Livingstone put it, "Muslims...it's their turn."

In a similar way the adoption of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other unreached people groups by missions, churches and seminaries needs to be accelerated. We need to emphasize cooperative programs that connect missions to seminaries and Christian schools in a way that facilitates recruitment and creation of teams. Over the past four years Columbia Biblical Seminary has cooperated first with OMF and then with several other missions in adopting people groups and creating teams of seminary students to go out to develop outreach. These teams work over a period of 5-6 summers developing an understanding of the people to be reached. In the process, some students sense the call of God to settle down in these new regions on a permanent basis. This paradigm seems to be working well and we feel it should be expanded to other Christian educational programs across the country. If 600 Evangelical Bible schools and seminaries adopted just two of the larger unreached peoples that would cover 1200 people groups and would cover 90% of the unreached world. There is no reason why this also couldn't be expanded to include cooperating Churches as well.

In keeping with the increasing need for bi-vocational missionaries, business and "platform development" will become a central aspect of all mission work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This actually will reduce the problem of dependence on the West by emerging churches because, for the first time, missionaries will embody the example of self-support in their lifestyle. In many ways this is like a return to the days of William Carey as well as the first-century Church.

The final area that concerns us is the matter of training for Christian ministry. It seems to me that the seminaries of the west are primarily designed on the assumption of an existing Christendom. Their paradigm is that of the scholar pastor. This pastoral role was primarily concerned with the maintenance of Christendom's structures. As I have said earlier, Christendom is dead. While I don't discount the importance of scholarship, the writings of journals, and the maintenance of accrediting structures such as ATS; I wonder how long these structures will last in a hostile environment? Once Islam gains

hegemony in Europe, and this seems inevitable given non-Muslim population decline, all such structures will be smashed. Perhaps with homosexual marriage and the decline of the family in America a similar downward population spiral will begin, albeit a generation or so later. Islam may gain its worldwide hegemony through the simple ballot box. Our structures must become more conformed to the reality of a hostile environment. The bombing of a Christian Church could just as well be repeated in the bombing of a Christian school. Decentralization will become increasingly important.

Related to this is a further concern -the sheer cost of such education- and this is a much bigger problem in the short run. Are the present structures worth what they cost and do they really train the kind of people we will need in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Bible colleges, Christian colleges and seminaries are all run according to western institutional school patterns. These patterns, even in secular circles, are going to change. The cost of education has far outstripped inflation for many years. The pressure of Islamic terrorism and oil crises will accelerate this problem even more at a time when technology provides us a much easier way to create a “TEE” environment everywhere. Residential programs may ultimately price themselves out of the market. It is time to begin to explore church-based educational programs where professors move instead of students or teach on-line and where the Christian “ethos” is provided in the Church itself. Most of the 2/3’s world is already there.

Two great battles are already occurring in the west and these may be expected to intensify in the coming decades. These are the battles for freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Given present trends, we may expect the West to lose its battles for these freedoms. They were based on Christian ideals and will inexorably die with the death of Christendom. The trends are already clearly seen with the emergence of so-called “religious vilification laws”. Under the rubric of “hate speech”, it has now become possible to suppress any genuine religious discourse and debate. Pastor Daniel Scot, a Pakistani who fled to Australia from Pakistan’s brutal blasphemy laws was convicted last year of vilifying Islam in Australia! Daveed Gartenstein-Ross explains the significance of the “Racial and Religious Tolerance Act” in Victoria, Australia:

“The Act prohibits conduct "that incites hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of" a class of people based on their religious beliefs. Its force was brought to bear against Scot and another pastor, Danny Nalliah, after three Australian converts to Islam covertly attended a seminar they held in March 2002, took notes, and then filed a legal complaint.

Similar laws are in force in Sweden and are being considered in Britain. The great irony is that the West, running scared from terror bombings, will concede its free speech birthright to the very people attacking them. Gartenstein-Ross goes on to say:

“Although many controversial ideas were put forward in the seminar (Scot contended that the Koran makes offensive jihad obligatory and that Islam places women in an inferior position), the presenters made clear that they weren't attacking Muslims as people. A transcript reveals that Scot admonished the audience to remember that "we are not here

learning how to fight with Muslims, we are learning here how we can love Muslims and help them to see the truth."

All such vilification acts, Roger Severino of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty points out, convert secular courts into religious review boards. Government then becomes the interpreter of what is a reasonable presentation of a faith. Further, these acts are contrary to freedom of speech and ultimately subvert their own purpose. Severino points out that:

"The act was intended to promote religious harmony, but appears to have done the opposite. Scot was charged with violating the act because three Muslim converts covertly attended his seminar--essentially, as spies. "They took offense, but they went there to be offended," Severino said. Severino says that because such spying "has now taken off" in Australia, a law intended to foster religious harmony seems instead to have produced acrimony."

What is perfectly obvious is that Christianity isn't benefited by such laws. Christ has been portrayed as a homosexual (The play *Corpus Christi*), as a sex maniac and bumbling idiot (The films *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Life of Brian*) and is regularly vilified or described as a non-existent person in the secular and particularly the academic press. The *DaVinci Code* is just the latest in a long line of such works. Criticism of the Bible is regular fare on the BBC but criticism of the Qur'an is forbidden. No modern secular scholar would write books that Billy Graham would sell on his website. Yet Western scholars such as Esposito and Armstrong write books sold on most of the Islamist websites as propaganda to convert Westerners to Islam. This is all part of the "nonsense" that Browne was talking about.

These double standards actually work in our favor because even the average person who is not a believer can see them. Religious vilification laws serve only to muzzle Christians who would seek to illustrate from the Islamic books what Muhammad actually taught and how he actually behaved. If people would just read the early Muslim books it would all become clear to them that they are being lied to. This is the greatest cover-up in world history. Though it means further vilification of our faith, we must strive to preserve freedom of speech as long as possible. There are Muslims who are questioning Islam as never before and though we know that vituperative attacks on the character of Muhammad are counter-productive, cool-headed illustration of what the *sira* (biographical literature of Muhammad) actually shows is demonstrably reinforcing some Muslims in their questioning of the faith.<sup>10</sup> To shut down this flow of information is surely insane even from a secularist viewpoint. Was Christendom demolished by everyone merely singing eulogies to the faith? We need to be writing letters to the editors and arguing forcefully through every Christian agency for freedom of speech. We

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<sup>10</sup> It is a little known fact that Baha Ullah the founder of the Bahai's turned away from Islam after reading Ibn Ishak's *Life of Muhammad*, the earliest biography of Muhammad written by a Muslim. This book is available in translation to English from Oxford University Press reprinted as late as 2001. All the other early *Sira* works tell the same story. It is astonishing that apparently no journalist on the planet has read any of these books. Esposito and Armstrong must have read them but they apparently followed the rule that anything controversial or uncomfortable was to simply be left out. Thus they have sanitized an already sanitized version of history. Such writing is, by definition, pure propaganda.

must do this while maintaining the freedom of those who hate us to vilify the Christian faith and Christians. The damage has already been done. They cannot but illustrate their double standards when they attack us now.

Muslims seek to muzzle a free press for the simple reason that Islam will not stand up under critical scrutiny. Christianity has accommodated itself to 100 years of this kind of critical attack. We cannot be hurt any longer by it. Islam, however, is deeply threatened by freedom of speech. This is why so many *fatwas* are issued from the Muslim world calling for the murder of those who criticize Islam. The legacy of Salmon Rushdie continues, not only in the memory of those of his publishers and translators who have been murdered, but also in the many other literary figures driven underground. Taslima Nasreen of Bangladesh, Isioma Daniel in Nigeria, Khalid Duran the recent murder of Theo Van Gogh as well as the controversy over a Danish paper's publication of cartoons mocking the Prophet, all serve to illustrate the lengths Muslims are willing to go to suppress free speech in the West. There is no freedom of speech in the Muslim world.

One comparison is worth mentioning here. In the 1930's, even when there was still a Christendom, Bertrand Russell was able to write a book entitled "Why I am Not a Christian". To the best of my knowledge, he was never threatened, changed his name or address or went underground because of his publication. Today, in the West, we have an unsung hero code-named "Ibn Warraq". That is not his real name. He wrote a book entitled "Why I am not a Muslim". Of course he has not become a darling of the western press the way Russell did. Multiculturalism seems to preclude this. Yet he is paying a much higher price. He is underground, here in the west! Were his identity to become known he would almost certainly be the object of a murder *fatwa*. But of course there is no difference between Christianity and Islam according to the western press. Christianity is the religion of pedophilia and Islam is the religion of peace! Such are the "truths" for much of western media. Ultimately we benefit by them.

The second area of concern is freedom of religion. The most chilling example of an attack on this right was recently pointed out by Daveed Gartenstein-Ross. He noted that in the Cumberland Law Review a recent article was published by Ali Khan calling for the "severe punishment" of Muslims who depart from the Muslim faith. Khan justified this position through the following analogy:

"The murtad (apostate) is akin to a corporate insider who discloses the secrets he has undertaken to protect; he is akin to a state official who turns traitor and joins the ranks of the enemy...All legal systems punish insiders who breach their trusts."

That such a ludicrous argument could be published in a western law journal is positively frightening, and an absolute rejection of the concept of freedom of religion. We may expect that with the loss of Christendom the West is willing even to trade away this most essential birthright in the desperate hope that somehow more concessions will convince the Islamists not to bomb us. Nothing in the world would do more to encourage the bombings of the Islamists. On this point we may find some very unusual allies in the

struggle. Atheists, Agnostics, Hindus, New Age, Wicca, all these groups have an abiding interest in the maintenance of freedom of religion. We would do well to forge alliances with such groups. Anyone who is a genuine seeker after truth will ultimately prove to be our friends. We must be the first to extend the hand of friendship.

Christendom is dead. The future holds grave challenges for the Christian Church. But make no mistake this is absolutely the most glorious time in world history to be a Christian! We are returning to the ethos of the first century Church.

Dave Cashin  
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