

Opinion outside the Theme

The West Is Christian— The Gospel Is Not Western

The Two Governments and Christian Witness after Christendom¹

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The Dentist, the Tractor, and the Wrong Defense of Christianity

A story circulated under the name of Walter J. Hollenweger, the Swiss theologian and pioneer of intercultural mission theology, and was printed in a 1991 ecumenical reader under the title “The Dentist and the Leader of the Women’s Exercise Group in Theological Conversation.” The printed location can now be identified, although the byline and any earlier publication still require verification against the physical volume.²

A pastor finds himself surrounded by people who have not attended church for two years. Their objections to Christianity come by the bucketful. The leader of the village women’s exercise group says that it makes no difference whether someone is Muslim or Christian. The pastor answers with an example about polygamy. A dentist then argues that Christianity has failed. It did not prevent two world wars, cannot solve world hunger, and cannot even persuade the baptized Christians of Europe and America of its truth. Hungry people, he says, need tractors, not tracts.

The pastor replies by asking why dentistry and the manufacture of tractors arose within the sphere of Western Christianity rather than within Buddhism. His point is that religions are not interchangeable. They narrate the world differently and therefore form different practices, expectations, and institutions.

1. Georg Warnecke, “The West Is Christian—The Gospel Is Not Western,” *Physhbournes’s Sundries*, July 2026, <https://physhbournes-sundries.blogspot.com/2026/07/the-west-is-christian-gospel-is-not.html>. The present essay substantially revises and expands that post.

2. “Der Zahnarzt und die Leiterin der Damenriege im theologischen Gespräch,” item 35 in *Vorlesebuch Ökumene: Geschichten vom Glauben und Leben der Christen in aller Welt*, ed. Susanne Beck et al. (Lahr: Kaufmann; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1991). The printed location is verified; the attribution to Walter J. Hollenweger and any earlier publication remain unverified.

The pastor is right about the difference and wrong about the proof.

Religions are not different packaging for the same content. They do not say the same things about the body, suffering, guilt, time, death, forgiveness, hope, or the purpose of human life. This can be said without ranking human beings and without reducing any living tradition to a textbook caricature. The refusal to collapse differences is a condition of serious conversation.

The error begins when Christianity is defended by the achievements of Western civilization. Dentistry is not the gospel, a tractor does not prove the resurrection, nor did modern science and technology emerge within a sealed Christian container. They arose through long histories of inheritance, translation, dispute, borrowing, and exchange involving Greek, Jewish, Islamic, Christian, and other intellectual traditions. What is sometimes presented as the self-generated possession of the Christian West is itself a history of reception.³

The anecdote, therefore, leaves better questions than the one it intended to answer: what is Christianity, and what is merely the West speaking in Christian language?

Contemporary arguments about the “Christian West” often begin where the pastor’s defense begins. They point to hospitals, universities, constitutional government, human rights, scientific inquiry, music, law, or social welfare and offer them as evidence for Christianity. The historical arguments may contain truth. Christian faith, worship, institutions, and disputes have shaped Western societies deeply, yet the theological inference does not follow. Cultural fruit is not proof of saving truth. Historical usefulness is not justification.

A related question runs through Paul R. Hinlicky’s reflection on the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence. Political freedom is not sustained by legal form alone but also depends on habits, loyalties, restraint, and moral formation that law cannot simply manufacture. If some of these goods arose within Christian histories, what happens when Christian memory weakens? The question concerns more than one nation’s anniversary. It reaches across Western societies, though it does not have the same history or the same political form in each of them.

This essay first distinguishes Christian historical formation from theological ownership before turning to Israel, justification, and the Lutheran teaching of the two governments, then finally asks what forms of political responsibility and Christian witness remain possible after the claim of possession has been surrendered.

3. For the Arabic–Latin translation movements and the cross-cultural transmission of learning, see Charles Burnett, “The Coherence of the Arabic–Latin Translation Program in Toledo in the Twelfth Century,” *Science in Context* 14, nos. 1–2 (2001): 249–288; and Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society* (London: Routledge, 1998). These sources do not settle the larger debate about the intellectual conditions of modern science; they do prevent a sealed-civilization account.

A Historical Mark, not a Theological Verdict

“The Christian West,” “Christendom,” and “cultural Christianity” name related but different realities. The Christian West is a broad and contested historical description of societies profoundly shaped by Christian texts, practices, institutions, and conflicts. Christendom names arrangements in which ecclesial and political orders understood themselves as parts of an integrated Christian people. Cultural Christianity describes the continued social presence of Christian symbols, habits, festivals, moral vocabularies, and institutional expectations even where personal faith is weak or absent. None of these terms names a single, uninterrupted civilization. None is innocent. None is merely imaginary.

Western societies have been marked by the Bible, Christian worship, churches, calendars, burial practices, moral arguments, public institutions, music, architecture, legal conflicts, and patterns of education and care. Even people who no longer believe may inhabit moral and linguistic worlds formed partly by those histories. The weekly calendar, public holidays, artistic canons, assumptions about the person, and ordinary figures of speech often bear traces of Christian reception long after explicit belief has receded. That mark is real. Denying it would be historically careless. Turning it into a certificate of virtue would be theologically disastrous.

A civilization cannot be baptized because baptism addresses and promises death and new life to concrete human beings gathered into the body of Christ. A culture cannot be justified because justification is God’s verdict on sinners, not an assessment of a civilization’s usefulness. A nation cannot become the body of Christ because the church is created by the gospel and sacraments, not by ancestry, territory, law, or political memory.

Christendom named real arrangements in which rulers, churches, institutions, and peoples understood public order through Christian symbols and claims. The forms differed greatly across periods and regions, yet the ideal of a *corpus christianum*, a Christian people ordered under intertwined spiritual and temporal authorities, exercised enormous historical power. Church and political order were distinguishable, but they were woven together through law, education, legitimacy, ritual, property, coercion, and mutual dependence.

This history generated real goods. It produced liturgies and music that still open human beings to dimensions of reality they might otherwise never hear. Bach is not an embarrassment to the argument. Neither are hospitals, schools, charitable institutions, the preservation and transmission of learning, or the long Christian arguments that helped limit rulers and protect conscience. A received good creates responsibility, not innocence.

The guilt is equally concrete. Jews were restricted, expelled, forcibly converted, and murdered under Christian signs and with Christian theological assistance. Confessional wars made the faith of rulers a matter of life, property, and exile for their subjects. Colonial expansion repeatedly joined commercial and political dom-

ination to missionary language. Christian churches could care for the sick and at the same time teach contempt for Jews, silence dissent, legitimate racial hierarchy, or bless conquest.

History is not an account book in which a cathedral cancels a massacre, a hospital balances a colony, or a cantata outweighs persecution. The law does not ask whether a civilization's final balance appears respectable. It names guilt as guilt.

The gospel does not answer by offering a more favorable calculation. It does not acquit the West because the West also produced art, medicine, constitutions, or schools. It does not justify Christianity by showing that Christians have been useful. The gospel says that God justifies the ungodly.

This verdict comes from outside the sinner. It is not inferred from moral performance, cultural achievement, institutional success, or historical influence. It is not earned by an individual, a church, a people, or a nation. In Jesus, the Christ, God speaks the sinner righteous. The case is decided outside the sinner's performance.⁴

The truth of Christianity, therefore, does not depend on the success of Christian history. The gospel would remain true if Christians had produced no cathedral, university, constitution, or welfare institution. Its truth rests in God's promise, not in the civilizing usefulness of those who confess it. In fact, Christianity makes truthful judgment possible. Christians may receive inherited goods with gratitude, confess inherited guilt without evasion, and work to preserve what serves human life. They need not turn any of those acts into a case for their civilization's righteousness.

Israel and the Origin the West Cannot Possess

The claim that the gospel is not Western does not begin with modern cultural pluralism. It begins with Israel. Jesus is a Jew. His Scriptures are Israel's Scriptures. The promises to which the gospel bears witness were not first entrusted to Europe, a Christian empire, or a later church civilization. Rabbi Paul does not present the nations as replacing Israel. In Romans 9–11, he warns Gentile believers against boasting. They do not support the root; rather, the root supports them. That warning concerns more than personal humility. It judges a whole Christian imagination of possession.

Supersessionism helped make the cultural ownership of Christianity thinkable. Once Israel could be treated as the church's obsolete prehistory, the Gentile church no longer had to understand itself as a recipient grafted into a history that preceded and exceeded it. It could imagine that the former bearer of the promises had fulfilled its role and left the stage. Europe could then present itself not merely as one historical place in which the gospel had been received, translated, loved, distorted, and opposed but as the gospel's mature home and natural guardian.

4. Augsburg Confession IV, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 38–39; Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, in the same volume, 120–145.

This movement was never only intellectual. It entered preaching, art, law, liturgy, mission, and public memory. The living Jewish people could become a theological remainder whose continued existence was difficult to explain except as judgment, obstinacy, or future conversion. The church's dependence was replaced by succession. Reception became inheritance, and inheritance became ownership.

Recent Pauline scholarship has recovered the extent to which Paul's mission to the nations remains a Jewish eschatological claim rather than a departure from Judaism into a new universal religion. Paula Fredriksen and Mark Nanos, in different ways, force Christian readers to reckon with Paul as a Jew addressing Gentiles without declaring Jewish covenantal life obsolete.⁵ That scholarship is not useful because it supplies a modern Christian argument with a convenient Jewish background. It is useful where it refuses the church's habit of making Israel function only as a stage in its own story.

A Jewish correction must go further. Michael Wyschogrod's insistence on Israel's embodied election resists every Christian attempt to dissolve Israel into an abstract principle of universality.⁶ Israel is not merely an example of the general claim that all truth comes from outside the self. It is a concrete people with a concrete history and promises that the church did not issue and cannot revoke. Christian theology does not honor Israel by turning Jewish particularity into a metaphor for Christian humility. Paul grounds this refusal in God's fidelity: God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29; cf. 11:1–2, 28). Israel's continuing election is therefore not a concession to modern sensibility but a confession that God remains faithful to what God has promised. The church's confidence in the promise spoken in baptism rests on that same fidelity, although Israel's election and baptismal incorporation must not be collapsed into one category.

This distinction does not resolve the church's relation to Israel's embodied election. It marks the point at which Christian theology must stop turning Israel into material for its own self-clarification. The church remains dependent on a history it did not generate and cannot absorb into its own categories without remainder.

Three meanings of "from outside" must therefore be distinguished. First, the gospel comes to Gentiles through a history that is not theirs. It comes through

5. Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), especially 32–130; Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), especially the treatment of Romans 9–11. The two authors differ in significant respects; both resist treating Paul as the founder of a de-Judaized Gentile religion.

6. Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 129; Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Wyschogrod is used here as a Jewish corrective to Christian abstraction; Jennings helps trace the reattachment of Christian identity to European land, race, and possession.

Israel's Scriptures, Israel's hope, Israel's Messiah, and the apostolic witness. This is a historical and covenantal priority. Israel remains the prior address and living root; it is not simply the first culture from which a universal message escaped.

Second, justification comes *extra nos*, from outside the sinner. This is a forensic and soteriological claim. The sinner does not manufacture the verdict, discover it in an interior depth, or establish it through a successful life. God speaks it in the promise of Jesus, the Christ.

Third, the gospel is always culturally mediated. It is heard in languages, carried by bodies, sung in musical forms, taught through institutions, and received within social worlds. It never appears as a cultureless object hovering above history, yet no cultural form exhausts or owns it. Gentiles receive the gospel through a history they did not generate, and the sinner receives a verdict that cannot be manufactured. These are distinct grounds—the first historical and covenantal, the second forensic and soteriological—but together they prevent cultural reception from becoming possession. The gospel can judge its Western bearers because it is not identical with Western reception. It can also judge every new translation, including those that flatter the receiving culture by removing the offense of Israel, the cross, judgment, promise, baptism, or resurrection.

The criteria of faithful translation are not mere foreignness or disruption. The church is bound to Israel's Scriptures, to Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, to the apostolic witness, to baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to the distinction of law and gospel. Some cultural forms may serve this witness better than others. Literacy, memory, legal protection for dissent, musical traditions, and stable institutions can be real gifts, but a more adequate bearer does not become an owner.

This distinction changes how Christian heritage must be read. Bonhoeffer's language of the Christian West can illuminate a real history but must also be interrupted by the prior question: whose history is absent when Europe narrates itself as the historical subject of Christianity?

Bonhoeffer: Heritage, Dissolution, and Guilty Order

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on the Christian West are indispensable and dangerous. They are indispensable because he understood that inherited order, political responsibility, and Christian confession cannot be separated by slogans. They are dangerous because his language can be recruited for nostalgia and civilizational self-defense.

The textual form matters. Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* is not a finished book but a collection of manuscripts written between 1940 and 1943 then later reconstructed by editors. "Heritage and Decay" belongs to this unfinished work. The material on the restraining power, though related, should not be presented as if Bonhoeffer

had delivered one seamless final argument.⁷ In “Heritage and Decay,” Bonhoeffer describes the disintegration of the old European *corpus christianum*. The former Christian people held together under emperor and pope had separated into church and political nation, so the integrated subject of Christendom no longer existed. This observation can illuminate the end of cultural Christianity, provided it is not turned into a lament for lost ecclesial domination.

Bonhoeffer wrote under National Socialist rule when law was being destroyed, truth was subordinated to propaganda, and human beings were stripped of rights and murdered. His language of decay cannot simply be transferred to pluralism, declining church attendance, or the loss of Christian cultural deference. Not every secular citizen is an enemy of Christ, not every social change is lawlessness, and not every criticism of the church is evidence of civilizational collapse.

Bonhoeffer’s account is also a Western European account. It cannot serve as the total map of Christian history. Jewish, Eastern Christian, colonial, and non-European histories do not occupy its center. His martyrdom does not make his historical judgments unassailable as a witness must be read, not canonized.

Still, Bonhoeffer offers an essential limit through his use of the restraining power. The biblical allusion comes from 2 Thessalonians 2 wherein an unnamed force or person holds back lawlessness. Its original referent is uncertain. Bonhoeffer uses the figure briefly but suggestively for ordering forces that restrain destruction within history. He immediately denies them a saving identity: the restrainer is not God and is not without guilt, though God may use it to preserve the world from destruction.⁸

The distinction is severe. Political order may be necessary without being innocent, may protect life without creating life, may limit evil without redeeming the world, and may preserve space for truthful speech while remaining answerable for its own violence, exclusions, and failures.

The application to contemporary institutions is a theological extension rather than a quotation from Bonhoeffer. A judge who restrains arbitrary power, a journalist who exposes a lie, a teacher who refuses racial humiliation, or an official who protects a persecuted family may perform a genuinely preserving service without naming it as such. The office does not become sacred, and the actor does not be-

7. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), especially “Heritage and Decay,” 103–133. The German critical edition makes clear that *Ethics* consists of unfinished manuscripts reconstructed in their probable sequence: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, vol. 6, ed. Ilse Tödt et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1992).

8. 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7. For Bonhoeffer’s statement that the restrainer is neither God nor without guilt, see Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 131–133. The contemporary institutional examples in the main text are a constructive application of his limitation, not a claim that Bonhoeffer named those professions as the *katechon*.

come a messiah. The deed must still be judged by what it does, whom it protects, what means it uses, and whether it remains open to correction. The danger begins when a limited task becomes a salvation-historical identity. A nation, party, church, or leader announces that it is the last wall against chaos. Political opponents become bearers of absolute evil. Criticism becomes treason. Limits on power appear as assistance to the enemy. The alleged restrainer must then be preserved without limit because everything supposedly falls if it falls.

The end of Christendom should not be answered by appointing a new protector of Christian civilization. The church does not need a political messiah but rather needs the freedom to distinguish God's promise from every provisional order that may serve the neighbor and still remain guilty.

Bonhoeffer describes what historically comes apart. The Lutheran teaching of the two governments helps clarify why this separation is not merely loss and why distinction must not become withdrawal.

Two Governments: Distinction without Withdrawal

What is commonly called the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms is better understood here as the teaching of God's two ways of governing. The terminology varies, and the history of interpretation is disputed. The point is not to map two sealed territories, one religious and one secular, but to distinguish offices, means, and ends. This grammar is historically located, but its theological claim cannot be reduced to a territorial settlement—it concerns the means by which faith is created as well as the limits of coercion. Coercion cannot create faith, and the gospel cannot be administered as civil law.

Through the gospel, God addresses sinners with promise, creates faith, forgives sins, and gathers the church. Faith cannot be coerced. A government may compel silence, punish conduct, regulate institutions, or demand an outward gesture, but it cannot create trust in God. The church therefore lives through the proclaimed Word, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and the calling of ministers to serve these gifts.

Through temporal government, God preserves outward life through law, office, judgment, institutions, work, family, and public responsibility. A hand that strikes may have to be stopped. A contract may have to be enforced. A violent person may have to be restrained. A child, refugee, dissenter, or poor person may need a public authority able to protect a right that cannot be enforced by private strength. The institutional forms of that protection remain historically contestable. The confessions do not specify a tax rate, a welfare system, a constitutional design, or a complete policy program. They do insist that temporal authority is an office for the neighbor rather than a private possession of the ruler.

The Lutheran confessions hold both claims. Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession affirms civil government, law, judgment, and public office. Article XXVIII denies

bishops the right to rule civil affairs by ecclesiastical command and denies secular rulers the competence to create faith or govern the church's proclamation.⁹ The distinction protects the state from ecclesial takeover and the church from political definition. No nation succeeds to Israel's election, and no commonwealth becomes the bearer of the gospel by cultural inheritance.

It also judges both sides. The state may regulate the outward affairs of churches where law, property, employment, safeguarding, or public accountability are involved. It may not decide which proclamation is the gospel or which political usefulness makes a church authentic. The church may speak publicly about law, violence, poverty, work, truth, and the treatment of strangers but may not transform the gospel into a coercive legal program and then call resistance to that program resistance to God. This is not political indifference. It is a discipline of jurisdiction and means.

The believer may be moved by faith to defend refugees, oppose a war, or argue about contested questions of law and conscience. Faith may be the deepest reason the believer speaks. It does not by itself settle what every citizen must be compelled to do. The temporal argument must still address shared facts, proportionality, law, foreseeable consequences, competing goods, and the rights of those who do not share the believer's confession.

The old Adam wears a uniform as easily as ordinary clothes. Public office does not make a person morally superior. Its significance lies in accountable authority: law, evidence, procedure, appeal, limitation, and responsibility outside the actor's private judgment. The tradition, therefore, does not command blind obedience. Political authority can betray its office and become a destroyer of those it is meant to protect. The Magdeburg Confession of 1550, written in direct response to the imperial imposition of the Augsburg Interim beginning in 1548, defended resistance by lower magistrates who already bore public responsibility for their subjects. It did not make every private person the final judge of the exception.¹⁰ The point here is narrow but important: even resistance was argued as an exercise of accountable office, not the spiritual coronation of private violence.

The two-governments teaching cannot generate a complete political program from the gospel, though it can expose illegitimate claims. A political movement cannot define "real Christianity" for the church. A church cannot make its moral vision binding by borrowing the state's coercive power and then describe the result as mission. Nor does the distinction create a clean Christian conscience.

9. Augsburg Confession XVI and XXVIII, in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 48–51, 91–102.

10. *Bekenntnis, Unterricht und Verantwortung der Pfarrherrn und anderer Diener der Kirchen zu Magdeburg*, April 13, 1550, in Irene Dingel, ed., *Der Adiaphoristische Streit (1548–1560)*, *Controversia et Confessio* 2, prepared by Jan Martin Lies and Hans-Otto Schneider (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 442–629, especially the second part on resistance; Robert von Friedeburg, "Martin Luther on the Legitimacy of Resisting the Emperor," *Journal of Law and Religion* 36, no. 3 (2021): 422–451.

Political action may be necessary, limited, mistaken, and guilty. Inaction may abandon the neighbor. The gospel does not provide a position outside history from which Christians remain pure while others carry responsibility. It does free them from the need to proclaim their own political action righteous before God.

This is a deep political consequence of justification but not a political blueprint. Because the actor does not live from the innocence of the action, the action need not be sanctified. It may be examined, corrected, repented of, and—where possible—repaired.

Hinlicky and Böckenförde: What Sustains Freedom?

Hinlicky's essay begins from a strain within American political freedom that also reaches beyond the United States. Americans, he writes, are "rich with such 'freedom from' but poor in 'freedom for.'" Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession helps him distinguish the temporal protection of outward liberty from the gospel's creation of forgiven and forgiving love. Temporal law can restrain trespass but cannot create the love that fulfills the law.¹¹

Hinlicky's American diagnosis opens a wider conversation. In a European, and especially an eastern German, setting, it is not the same political argument, yet it exposes a recognizable theological pressure point: can political liberty endure when the cultural practices that form people for responsible freedom weaken? Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde formulated the dilemma sharply: the liberal secularized state lives from conditions that it cannot itself guarantee.¹² A free state depends on trust, solidarity, self-restraint, truthful public speech, acceptance of loss, and recognition of opponents as fellow citizens. It can protect these conditions by law, education, and institutions yet cannot simply command them into existence without turning freedom into compulsory virtue.

Placed beside Böckenförde's dictum, Hinlicky's question becomes sharper. If Christian worship, teaching, family practices, congregations, schools, and moral vocabularies helped form the dispositions on which political liberty depends, then the erosion of Christian memory may consume moral capital that secular institutions cannot replenish. The end of Christendom may not only clarify theology but may also weaken the social conditions in which freedom survives.

11. Paul R. Hinlicky, "What Is Freedom? The Declaration of Independence on its 250th Anniversary," *Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology* 1, no. 3 (2026): 155–163, at 160. Hinlicky's argument is engaged as a theological account of negative and positive freedom, not as an occasion for commentary on specific American parties or current domestic policy.

12. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, "The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization," in *Religion, Law, and Democracy: Selected Writings*, eds. Mirjam Künkler and Tine Stein, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 152–167, esp. 167. See also Tine Stein, "The Böckenförde Dictum—On the Topicality of a Liberal Formula," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2018): 97–108.

That objection should not be dismissed. The loss of Christian practices can be a real loss. Words for forgiveness, habits of confession, limits on sovereign desire, care for the weak, and an authority before which rulers and citizens alike are answerable do not reproduce themselves automatically. A society may inherit them for a time while forgetting the stories and communities that carried them.

Two qualifications are nevertheless decisive. First, a Christian genealogy does not establish Christian ownership. Even where a public good was formed through Christian arguments and practices, the church does not receive jurisdiction over the state or the conscience of the citizen. Genealogy creates responsibility, not a title deed. The state cannot coerce the religious conditions of its own freedom without betraying freedom. The church cannot guarantee those conditions either. Christian societies have produced courage and servility, resistance and obedience to tyranny, care and exclusion. Christian formation is not a moral machine. The same Bible has been heard as a word against slavery and as a defense of slavery. The same church can teach that every ruler stands under judgment and then bless the ruler's violence.

Second, the sources of democratic ethos need not be monopolized by the church. Families, schools, associations, professions, religious communities, and secular moral traditions can form persons capable of compromise, truthfulness, and public responsibility. Whether these institutions are presently able to sustain such formation is an empirical question, not a theological guarantee. The erosion of Christian memory may coincide with the weakening of other forms of inherited responsibility as well.

This essay therefore makes no promise that political goods will survive the loss of the traditions that helped carry them. Post-Christendom may clarify the church's task while remaining a serious loss for the neighbor. Political liberty can erode. Institutions can hollow out. Citizens can become consumers of rights without accepting responsibility for a common world. Secularization does not guarantee maturity, and Christian decline does not guarantee liberation.

However, the refusal of jurisdiction is not a refusal of institutional responsibility. Christians may sustain schools, hospitals, associations, practices of care, and institutions of public accountability in cooperation with others and under common law. Such work belongs to temporal service, neither proving the gospel nor giving the church title to the state or to the citizen's conscience.

Two claims must therefore remain distinct. The theological claim is firm: even a demonstrably Christian genealogy establishes no ecclesial ownership of the commonwealth. The empirical question remains open—some public goods may weaken when the communities and practices that carried them weaken. Even then, no mandate for restoration follows. The gospel can form freedom for the neighbor, but it is not a civic technology that guarantees the survival of a political order. A church that conscripts it for that purpose corrupts the gospel without securing the state.

The church's contribution is therefore neither withdrawal nor cultural control. It may form people who know that freedom is not sovereign desire; that conscience cannot be leased to a ruler, party, market, or church apparatus; that the neighbor's freedom matters even when the neighbor is wrong; and that forgiveness is neither amnesia nor escape from responsibility. Further, it may cooperate with others who protect law, truth, and the vulnerable without pretending that cooperation creates a Christian state.

Hinlicky's "freedom for" belongs here. The gospel frees the sinner from the endless defense of the self and therefore for the neighbor. This freedom cannot be produced by temporal law. It may nevertheless become socially visible in promise keeping, truth telling, service, patience, courage, and the refusal to make an enemy into an antichrist. The church cannot restore the lost cultural unity of the West but can cultivate practices that serve freedom without claiming ownership of freedom. It can make its public contribution precisely by refusing to become the chaplaincy of a political project.

Eastern Germany: Where the Question Becomes Concrete

The end of Christendom can remain an abstract phrase where churches still possess buildings, schools, public recognition, money, and cultural prestige. Eastern Germany offers a more severe test. It is not a universal model for the West but instead is a place where one possible future has already become ordinary life.

At the 1997 German Protestant Church Congress in Leipzig, West German television crews asked young people whether they were Protestant or Catholic. The young people looked puzzled and answered, in effect, "Nothing. We are normal." Axel Noack later named the deeper condition in the title of a published essay: "They have forgotten that they have forgotten God."¹³

The first sentence describes more than nonmembership. Religion was not being rejected as an enemy. It no longer belonged to the ordinary grammar by which life was described. To be Protestant or Catholic appeared as a special condition, so, as such, normality meant no denomination, no ecclesial belonging, and often no need to account for their absence.

The second sentence goes further. Forgetting may leave a trace. A person may sense that something has been lost. When people have forgotten that they have forgotten, the absence no longer presents itself as an absence. There is no religious wound waiting for the church to heal and no concealed Christian question that only needs the right marketing.

Eastern German secularization cannot be reduced to forty years of socialist state atheism, though those years matter. The landscape also carries the histories of

13. Axel Noack, "Sie haben vergessen, daß sie Gott vergessen haben," *idea*, September 20, 2000. The Leipzig Church Congress exchange is presented as an anecdotal recollection; Noack's published title is the textual attribution used for the deeper diagnosis.

Protestant establishment, war, National Socialism, institutional collapse, migration, demographic change, and the failure of churches to become self-evidently credible after reunification. Scholarship has described this as a form of “forced secularity” while also showing that nonreligion became socially reproduced across generations rather than remaining merely the effect of state pressure.¹⁴

Western explanations often treat the East as an object whose deficit must be diagnosed from outside. That repeats the posture the church must unlearn. Eastern Germany is not a mission field because its people are culturally empty. Rather, it is a world of biographies, loyalties, moral traditions, wounds, skills, and meanings in which Christian language may simply not function as a shared reference. This is a substantial loss. Empty churches are not poetic. Generations growing up without access to Christian language are not merely an exciting opportunity for institutional innovation. Something has disappeared: stories, songs, practices of lament, words for forgiveness, and forms of communal memory. Secularization has not done the church a favor.

The loss should be allowed to stand as loss. It is also an unveiling but not a consolation. It reveals how much of what churches called mission depended on inherited familiarity. The church knew how to accompany baptismal families, confirm adolescents sent by their parents, and provide rites for people who still recognized its language even when they did not believe it strongly. When that background disappears, the church can no longer assume that people understand what sin, grace, resurrection, sacrament, or even God mean.

The patterns differ across the West. In England and Wales, the 2021 census recorded “Christian” below half of the population for the first time while “no religion” rose sharply. In the United States, long-term Christian decline is real, but recent Pew data suggest a period of relative stability rather than an uninterrupted collapse.¹⁵ “The post-Christian West” therefore names no single timetable. Eastern Germany is a stark case, not a prophecy with one date.

The response cannot be to speak more loudly in the old dialect. Nor can it be to replace the gospel with generally approved values in order to regain relevance. A moral pressure group with hymns may receive public attention but has not thereby proclaimed what God does for the ungodly.

14. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein, and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Forcierte Säkularität: Religiöser Wandel und Generationendynamik im Osten Deutschlands* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009).

15. Office for National Statistics, “Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021,” November 29, 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>; Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study 2023–24* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-religious-identity/>. The census recorded Christian affiliation at 46.2 percent in England and Wales. Pew reported a long-term decline in Christian identification in the United States alongside relative stability from 2019 to 2024. Affiliation, belief, practice, and theological commitment are not identical measures.

The loss of Christian vocabulary requires patient translation. Translation is not simplification but the work of making a word understandable without making it say something else. The church must explain why forgiveness is not mere self-acceptance, why baptism is promise rather than religious decoration, and why the crucified Messiah is not a symbol of civilizational success. Such witness begins with listening, but it does not end there. The church does not merely echo the questions a culture already asks. The gospel also asks questions that neither the culture nor the church would ask of itself.

The Tribunal after God

People in post-Christian societies may no longer ask, “How can I find a gracious God?” It would be a mistake to imagine that they secretly ask Luther’s question in the same form and need only have it uncovered. The following claim is, therefore, not a report about the inner experience of every secular person but a theological interpretation of social practices in which people are evaluated, compared, ranked, rewarded, and required to present an accountable self.

A job application asks for a coherent professional identity. A performance review translates labor into metrics. A social-media profile becomes a public archive of taste, opinion, achievement, and error. A political controversy demands not only a judgment about an act but proof that the speaker belongs to the morally acceptable side. None of these practices is simply evil. Work needs evaluation, public speech has consequences, and responsibility requires reasons, yet together they make visible a world of judgments that never finally close the case. Alain Ehrenberg has described the exhaustion produced by societies in which individuals are increasingly commanded to become autonomous, successful selves. He describes the social demand for autonomous self-construction. The theological interpretation begins where his sociology ends.¹⁶

Christian theology may read these practices as demands for self-justification, even where those who inhabit them do not experience them in religious terms. Such demands appear wherever value must be secured through performance, innocence, belonging, productivity, authenticity, or public recognition. The standards vary and contradict one another. A person may satisfy one tribunal and fail before the next. These judges can measure, rank, reward, shame, and discard. They can close a transaction. However, none can close the case.

A market can reward or reject but cannot forgive. Public opinion can praise or destroy but cannot raise the dead. The self can revise its narrative and still remain

16. Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. Enrico Caouette, Jacob Homel, David Homel, and Don Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010). Ehrenberg’s social diagnosis is not treated as proof of the Lutheran doctrine of justification.

both advocate and judge in its own case. This does not mean that secular people are secretly miserable or that Christians possess an easy psychological cure. It means that Christian theology can read these social practices under the law as places where human beings seek or receive judgments that cannot give the final word they implicitly claim.

The gospel addresses this world not as the religious decoration of a lost culture but as a word no market, nation, institution, church, or self can speak on its own: God justifies the ungodly. That word does not confirm a successful self-construction. It interrupts it. It does not say that the person became valuable enough to deserve love but instead says that the person's life rests in God's address in Jesus, the Christ. This is the *extra nos* of justification: the verdict comes from outside the sinner's performance.

The church stands under the same judgment. An institution anxious about decline can turn mission into a project of self-justification. New members, public relevance, political influence, and numerical growth become evidence that the church deserves to survive. The neighbor then becomes the means by which the institution proves its vitality. Mission cannot be the church's strategy for winning its case.

Mission after Cultural Christianity

Mission begins not with the church's need to survive but with God's sending. The Father sends the Son. The risen Christ sends witnesses. The Spirit creates faith through the external Word and the sacraments where and when it pleases God. The church does not own this mission; rather, it is drawn into what belongs to God.¹⁷ Further, mission is witness, not an advertising agency for Christianity. Advertising begins with a product, a target group, and a result to be produced. Christian witness begins with a promise the church itself receives and cannot control. The church cannot manufacture faith by marketing, technique, demographic targeting, or strategic planning. It can nevertheless make the Word audible or obscure it through language, rooms, schedules, budgets, administration, liturgy, catechesis, and human trust. The person addressed is not a market segment, an institutional resource, or evidence that the congregation has a future.

The end of Christendom removes the fiction of Christian home ground. The West is not a baptized continent that has become delinquent. Its people are not inherited church property who must be returned to their proper institution. The church has no property claim over their consciences, histories, or future. Mission that forgets Israel can repeat supersessionism in a gentler form, treating other peoples as empty ground for Christian expansion.

17. On *missio Dei* and the church as recipient rather than owner of mission, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389–393.

That witness is public. It addresses actual societies and cannot avoid questions of power, truth, law, work, poverty, violence, and the treatment of strangers, yet it does not become public by turning itself into a party platform. It serves the neighbor in temporal affairs and speaks the gospel through the means given to the church. The distinction is not separation but allows cooperation without capture and proclamation without coercion.

A scene from eastern Germany gives this claim a body. In 1991, during my vicariate in Schafstätt, an asylum-seeker hostel was opened in the former agricultural cooperative directly opposite the church. Shortly before the first Sunday in Advent, word spread that a right-wing group intended to come late at night and set the hostel on fire.

The church council and members of the municipal council asked what could be done. Their answer was neither a theological statement nor an armed counterforce. They began Advent outside the hostel. A trumpet and violin accompanied Advent hymns. People held candles and drank mulled wine in the bitter cold. The doctor and mayor both attended. Pensioners, mothers, and grandmothers came, some with their work aprons beneath their coats. A long line of villagers stood between the hostel and those who had announced violence.

Eventually, thirty or forty young men arrived. Many were scarcely more than boys. One stood shivering in an open bomber jacket before an older woman. She did not deliver a political lecture. She called him *Jungchen*—"young man"—asked why he was doing this when the residents had done him no harm and told him to put on something warm because he could have been her grandson. Finally, the group withdrew. Two weeks later the threat returned, and the vigil was repeated. Again the hostel was not attacked.

The story did not end in triumph, however. The pastor and vicar later went to a nearby tavern known as a meeting place for the group. They listened, spoke, and returned several times. The conversations became more human. Then they were warned not to come again. The warning was serious, and they did not return.

No conversion was recorded. No scalable model emerged. No one can know exactly why violence was prevented. Perhaps the number of witnesses mattered. Perhaps the young men were uncertain. Perhaps the presence of their neighbors' mothers and grandmothers made the violence harder to perform. The episode remains unfinished.¹⁸ The story, too, should remain unfinished.

Such an episode shows something the abstract language of mission can hide. The church did not claim the village as Christian territory. It stood with threatened

18. Georg Warnecke, "An Untold Story of Christian Responsibility," *Physhbournes's Sundries*, April 7, 2026, <https://physhbournes-sundries.blogspot.com/2026/04/an-untold-story-of-christian.html>. This is an autobiographical recollection rather than independent historiography. Details that remained uncertain in the original account have been omitted, and the essay makes no claim to establish why the attack did not occur.

strangers, cooperated with public authorities, and prayed in its own language without demanding either control or conversion. It addressed potential attackers as human beings without excusing the intended violence, acting publicly and accepting that the outcome was not in its hands.

This is not the whole of mission. Protection of the neighbor belongs to temporal responsibility and may be performed by Christians and non-Christians alike. Advent hymns do not make a public vigil a sacrament, yet the scene displays distinction without withdrawal. The church's spiritual witness and the community's temporal responsibility met without becoming identical. Mission also has a slower form. People rarely learn faith as they learn a vocabulary list. They encounter trustworthy persons, enter rooms, hear words they do not yet understand, leave, return, object, watch, and sometimes discover that an old word has begun to address them. Research on adult conversion has repeatedly shown the importance of relationships and long processes. Such research cannot explain or produce faith. It can correct the church's fantasy that a campaign, course, or event controls the result.¹⁹

The practical consequences are modest and demanding. A congregation explains its worship without presuming prior knowledge. It creates places where adults can ask questions over time rather than attend one promotional event and teaches baptism as promise, not family decoration. It offers absolution as a word spoken to a sinner, not as general affirmation, as well as serves at funerals, in hospitals, in schools, at kitchen tables, and in public conflicts without turning grief or vulnerability into recruitment opportunities.

Additionally, the congregation examines its structures. A church budget is not the gospel, but it reveals what the church protects. A congregation can speak of mission while spending nearly all its strength on buildings, administration, and inherited expectations. A regional church can praise innovation while cutting the local pastoral presence through which the Word remains audible. Structures do not create faith. They can still preach against the gospel by treating people as costs, obstacles, or instruments.

Mission after Christendom, therefore, begins with confession as much as strategy. Where does the church use the neighbor to justify its existence? Where does it replace Jesus, the Christ, with approved values? Where does it hide the promise behind an insider code? Where does it seek political protection because it no longer trusts the Word to create the church?

The church does not build itself. That sentence does not excuse laziness. It frees work from self-deification. Christians may plan without pretending to create faith, invite without manipulating, preserve buildings without worshiping them,

19. John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992); Johannes Zimmermann and Anna-Konstanze Schröder, eds., *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben?* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2010). These studies report extended paths of faith, not a technique for producing conversion.

close institutions without declaring Christ defeated, and speak publicly without demanding rule. The church may lose cultural privilege and still have everything necessary for its commission: scripture, proclamation, baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, prayer, the neighbor, and time.

Conclusion: Inheritance without Ownership

Is the West Christian? Historically, yes. Christian Scripture, worship, institutions, conflicts, and moral vocabularies have marked Western societies deeply. That history includes gifts worth receiving and guilt that must not be converted into abstraction. The answer theologically, however, is no. The West is not justified, baptized, elected, or made the body of Christ by its cultural inheritance. The gospel came to the Gentile West through Israel. The Gentile church does not support the root. The root supports it. What the church received cannot become a Western possession without ceasing to be received as gift.

Politically, the answer remains limited. Christian traditions have helped form practices and institutions of freedom. Their erosion may place real goods at risk, but genealogy creates responsibility, not jurisdiction. The church cannot preserve freedom by coercing the faith that freedom requires. The secular state cannot secure all its moral conditions by law. Neither can guarantee the future.

The two governments provide no painless solution. They distinguish the gospel's promise from the state's limited office, the church's witness from political rule, and public responsibility from the fantasy of innocence. They permit Christians to support law, protect the weak, resist tyranny, cooperate with secular institutions, and confess political guilt without turning any order into a savior. The end of Christendom is therefore neither pure liberation nor simple catastrophe. It can expose what was hidden and can destroy memories and practices that cannot easily be recovered. The church is not called to celebrate the loss. It is called to tell the truth within it.

Hinlicky's question about freedom remains. A society rich in "freedom from" may become unable to say what freedom is for. The church cannot solve this by recovering mastery of the culture. It can bear witness to a freedom that law cannot create: the freedom of the sinner whose case has been decided by God and who therefore need not make the neighbor, the enemy, the nation, or the church into an instrument of self-justification.

That freedom does not withdraw from the world but instead keeps promises. It protects the neighbor, tells the truth about inherited goods and inherited guilt, and can stand with refugees outside a hostel, sing Advent hymns, cooperate with a mayor, speak to a frightened young man, and leave the outcome to God.

The West did not create the gospel and cannot own it.
Because it is not ours, it can judge us.
Because it is not ours, it can set us free.

Georg Warnecke is a retired Lutheran pastor and theological blogger in Germany. After many years in parish ministry, mission, and congregational development, he was invited to teach practical theology at the University of Greifswald and worked in pastoral formation and research on missional church and ministry in post-Christian eastern Germany. He later served in interim ministry and church organizational development. His current work focuses on Lutheran theology, mission, ecclesiology, leadership, Christian witness in post-Christian societies, and the theological and ecclesial implications of artificial intelligence.

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