

UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

29: Secularism and Atheism (1900 - present)

The East

The Armenian Genocide

In the late nineteenth century the Ottoman authorities withdrew their protection of the 'Millet Sadika' the 'Faithful' or Armenian nation. The Turks feared that the Armenians, like the Bulgarians, were about to establish an independent state with Imperial Russian backing. This assumption took no account of implacable Russian hostility towards Armenian independence which would inevitably result in the loss of Russian territory and independence for neighbouring Georgia (also a Russian province). In the 1890s the Ottomans incited Muslim Turks and Kurds against their Armenian neighbours resulting in terrible massacres, initially in Pontus spreading to Cilicia and then elsewhere.

When the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers it was suspected that the Armenians would stage an uprising to support the Allies. In 1915 Muslim irregulars and volunteers from abroad were unleashed against all centres of Armenian population. The military were brought in to deport all Christians from regions close to the 'Eastern Front' or areas threatened by the Allies. These measures impacted on Greeks, Levantines and Jacobite Syrians but in the case of the Armenians and Assyrians they were implemented in a manner reminiscent of the 'final solution'. It is thought that from 1915 to 1918 around a million Armenians were killed or died on the forced marches into the Syrian Desert, many were gassed in concentration camps in northern Syria. The numbers are uncertain, but the majority of the Assyrians were wiped out.

The 'Asia Minor Catastrophe'

Philadelphia, the last Byzantine stronghold in Asia Minor (Anatolia), was taken by the Turks in 1390. Nevertheless, Greeks and Armenians remained a significant component in the population of Asia Minor up to the 1920s. Greek speakers predominated along the Aegean,

Mediterranean and Black Sea shores as far east as Georgia in the north and Antioch (Turkish Antakya) in the south. Forms of the Greek language were widely used by Christians and Muslims in Ionia in the east, Cilicia in the south and Pontus in the north. Antique forms of Greek thrived in certain isolated inland enclaves like Cappadocia alongside 'Karamanli' a unique Turkish language spoken by Christian communities. Smyrna (Izmir), Trebizond (Trabzon) and other urban centres provided a focus for Anatolian Greeks and attracted Orthodox Christian migrants from the Balkans and the Arab regions. Smyrna became known as 'Infidel Izmir' by the Turks as Christian groups dominated the life of the city. Greeks, Armenians and Levantines (Roman Catholics) occupied distinct districts of the city while substantial communities of Protestants and Assyrians lived closer to the Muslim and Jewish Quarters.

After the First World War Greece responded to the Italian occupation of Attaleia (Antalya) by occupying Smyrna (15 May 1919). Although this was a move to prevent encirclement (the Italians were entrenched in the Dodecanese and had occupied Albania, a northern neighbour of Greece) it conformed to the 'Great Idea' or the projected union of all Greek peoples. The Turks recognized the threat and fought back fiercely. The Treaty of Sevres in August 1920 confirmed the Greek presence in Ionia and thus provoked further Turkish resistance. Continued irregular warfare led to a Greek campaign in 1921 that was only defeated at the Sangarios (Sakarya) river.

Defeat in the vicinity of Ankara led to a disorganized Greek withdrawal and the military evacuation of Smyrna (8 September 1922). It is claimed that in Smyrna alone the victorious Turks massacred up to 50,000 Greeks and Armenians and burnt the Christian Quarters of the city. St Chrysostom Kalaphatis, the Metropolitan of Smyrna, was brutally lynched when he interceded for his flock (10 September 1922). By 1924 the entire Greek Christian population of Asia Minor had been exterminated or expelled, either in the immediate aftermath of the Greek defeat or in the later population exchanges. Greek speaking Muslims were exempted from the exchange and were soon joined by their brethren expelled from Crete and the north

of Greece. A small community of Karamanlis survived by setting up the 'Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate' but the vast majority joined the 2 million Orthodox Christians leaving their ancestral homes to be resettled in Greece.

The Orthodox Christians of Constantinople (Istanbul), Antioch (Antakya) and 2 Aegean Islands (Imbros and Tenedos) were exempted from this great exile. Armenians of Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions were exempted in these areas but expelled from most other regions. Both communities suffered further persecution in the 1930s, 1950s and 1970s – again drastically reducing numbers. Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) communities held on in the south (around Mardin) but all remaining Assyrians were deported to Iraq and Syria. Although the Levantines (Roman Catholics) survived by espousing Turkish nationalism, the loss of the ancient Christian heartland of Asia Minor (along with important shrines, monasteries and monuments) further isolated the Christian minorities of the Arab countries and Iran. Turkish repression of Christian minorities has invariably inspired similar measures in neighbouring Muslim countries (notably during the First World War and 1920s, Egypt providing a clear example).

The Turkish Republic

Turkish resistance to the Allied Forces was master-minded by the gifted Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish hero of Gallipoli. In the closing days of the First World War he directed campaigns against the Ottoman authorities (now collaborating with the Allies), the Armenians and Georgians in the east, the French and Italians in the south, the British at Chanak, Islamic revival movements and Kurdish insurgents. Following the resounding defeat of the Greeks he founded the Turkish Republic as Ataturk –the 'Father of the Turks'.

The new government had come to an understanding with the Soviets and won the 'favourable neutrality' of the Great Powers, freeing them up to deal with their local enemies. The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) enshrined international recognition for this new Turkey. This

was a state that was founded on radical, secular and nationalist principles. Both the Ottoman Sultanate and Muslim Caliphate were abolished, the Roman Alphabet was introduced, Sufi and other Muslim brotherhoods were violently suppressed and a form of democracy was adopted.

An exchange of populations regularized the expulsion of troublesome Christian minorities and brought in large numbers of progressive and educated Muslims from the Balkan countries and the USSR. Aspiring to be a modern nation-state the Turkish elite looked to Europe and the USA. In this context the continued existence of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople looked increasingly to be an embarrassment, a reminder of the Ottoman and Byzantine past and of a 'messier' state of affairs.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate

The Turkish authorities supported the 'Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate' against the Ecumenical Patriarchate, transferring churches and properties to the former. For a variety of reasons, not least a series of Protestant reforms, the 'Turkish Orthodox Patriarchate' attracted little support. Although, supplemented by Russian refugees in the 1920s the Orthodox Christian population of Turkey was virtually halved in every decade following the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Pogroms against the Greek and Armenian communities of Constantinople (Istanbul) in September 1955 (when 40 Greek churches were subjected to arson attacks) and again in 1974 resulted in renewed emigration, particularly amongst the Greeks. In the 1970s the remaining institutions associated with the Ecumenical Patriarchate were closed down and further restrictions placed on the free movement of Orthodox hierarchs.

However, in 1987 the Orthodox were allowed to restore a section of the Patriarchate that had been destroyed in 1941. Although the number of Greeks in the 'Queen of Cities' had fallen to under a few thousand in the 1980's new arrivals from the Arab countries doubled

the flock of the Ecumenical Patriarch and in the 1990s economic migrants from the old Soviet bloc raised the profile of the Orthodox across Turkey. The present Patriarch, Bartholomaios, has persuaded the Turkish authorities that the Christian leaders in Turkey are reliable representatives of the new Turkey in the West, not least in advocating entry to the EU. In this context a number of concessions have either been won or are under negotiation and the Turks are happier to recognize an international role for the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In a troubled world, the Turks are discovering the advantages of hosting a Patriarch who can command an international audience and speak out against the Russians (whether relating to re-emerging Orthodox Churches of the former Soviet Republics or the liquidation of the Russian Greeks under Stalin).

Cyprus

In 1878 Great Britain signed a convention with the Ottomans by which the British were to administer the island for the Sultan. As under the Turks, every aspect of the life of the Church was closely regulated. This arrangement held until the First World War when the island was annexed to the British Empire. The majority community, the Greek Cypriots, began to aspire towards union with Greece when the British offered to cede the island to Greece in 1915. When the island was declared a British Colony in 1925 the troubles began. A series of uprisings against the British soon encompassed inter-communal conflict between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Finally, Cyprus was granted independence in 1960 and the Orthodox Ethnarch, Makarios, was elected president. Inter-communal violence broke out again after 1963 and when the Greeks backed a coup in 1974 the Turks invaded and partitioned the island, expelling most Christians from the north of the island. This partition remains, although the north is now a quasi-independent entity, and attempts to reconcile the two sides have met with little success.

The Russian Revolution and the Soviet Era

In the last decades of the nineteenth century a number of radical political movements emerged across the Russian Empire, mostly proclaiming atheism. Revolutionary groups were inspired by the ideals of 'scientific socialism' and increasingly persuaded that the violent overthrowing of both monarchy and Church were a prerequisite for progress. After the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, the new Soviet government instituted the systematic persecution of the Church, which consisted not only in the seizure of ecclesiastical properties, but in the imprisonment and murder of a great many bishops, priests and religious, a pattern that would be imitated, with greater or lesser ferocity, by other Eastern European 'revolutionary' regimes later in the century.

The Bolsheviks had been attacking the Orthodox Church long before they came to power. At the end of a bloody civil war with the White Russians the new Soviet leadership was able to rally supporters for a major assault on the Church (1921-22). The Patriarch of Moscow, St Tikhon Belavin, was arrested in 1922 as an enemy of the state. Across the USSR Orthodox Christians were harassed, imprisoned or executed, long after the end of civil strife. The 'Living Church' was founded in 1923 to weaken the position of the Patriarchate and support the new government. It initially included numerous sincere Orthodox reformers and progressive elements but it was eventually liquidated by Stalin. A declaration of loyalty was exacted from Patriarch Tikhon in 1923. This was more fully proclaimed under a provisional successor, Sergey Starogorodsky, in 1927.

Following the full subjugation of the Church to the militantly atheist Soviets a number of groups abroad argued that it was impossible to retain links with Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia severed links in 1928 and the 'Metropolia' of Bishop Evlogy Georgievsky joined the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1931. This Metropolia of France will be remembered for a number of great saints, like St Maria Skobtsova (gassed by the Nazis) and

an astonishing channelling of intellectual and academic creativity, not least at the famed Institute of St Serge in Paris.

New Soviet laws were promulgated in 1929 that restricted every aspect of Church life and suppressed the expression of any faith (at first the Bolsheviks had targeted the Orthodox Church as most pernicious). The Stalinist purges exacted a terrible toll on every level of the Church up to the very highest. Miraculously, Stalin sanctioned a renewal of Church life in 1941-45 during the Second World War in recognition of the resistance inspired by the Orthodox Church throughout Europe (support for 'the Great Patriotic War'). The Patriarchate was restored and Sergey Starogordsky was appointed patriarch in 1943. The Church was enabled to re-establish international links, not least with Orthodox parishes overseas, to engage in ecumenical dialogue and participate in the peace movement.

The ascendancy of Nikita Khrushchev (1958-64) represented a 'thaw' for intellectuals and a respite for dissidents, alongside a renewed and merciless assault on the Orthodox Church and other faith groups. In these years over half of surviving churches were either destroyed or closed and Church leaders and ordinary Christians were confined to psychiatric wards. The Leonid Brezhnev years saw the emergence of a certain status quo. Unexpectedly, the celebration of the 'Millennium of the Baptism of Rus' brought about a great revival of Russian Orthodoxy.

The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia

Also known as the 'Russian Church in Exile' or 'Russian Orthodox Church Abroad' or the 'Karlovtsy Synod'. This Church emerged from an autonomous jurisdiction that was formed by a group of southern Russian bishops who found themselves in White-held territory during the Russian civil war of 1919-21. They were inspired by a decision of the Russian Patriarchate in 1920 to entrust leadership to Metropolitan Antony Khrapovitsky (from 1919 to his death in 1936). This group followed the defeated Cossacks and other White regiments to

Constantinople, Greece and on to Yugoslavia. A Synod was established in Karlovtsy in Serbia and, enjoying Serbian Orthodox patronage, was initially recognized by the Eastern Orthodox Churches as being responsible for regulating the ecclesiastical affairs of the Russian émigrés. However, by 1928, when the Synod broke off relations with Moscow, the greater number of Eastern Orthodox Churches had withdrawn support, largely to back the autonomous Russian Metropolia (France and America).

After the Second World War the Synod relocated to the USA but continued to maintain links with the Serbian Orthodox and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. In the 1960s the Synod controversially extended its protection to a number of Old Calendarist Churches in Greece and Cyprus. This process was repeated in Romania and Bulgaria in the 1990s. 'Ecumenism' was anathematized in 1983. Following troubles in Palestine, the Synod established a jurisdiction in the former Soviet Union (1990), bringing it into closer conflict with the Patriarchate of Moscow. However, in more recent years a reconciliation with Moscow has been reached and the two Churches united in 2008.

Throughout this period, the Synod played a disproportionately important role in the unfolding life of the Orthodox Churches worldwide. This was due to a number of charismatic figures, not least St John Maximovitch the bishop of Shanghai and San Francisco (d.1966), and a commitment to principles that inspired Orthodox traditionalists and zealots in many countries. The Synod glorified the Royal Romanov Martyrs in 1981 and promoted the veneration of Orthodox Western Saints since first entering into exile.

The West The legacy of the German Protestant Theological Schools

Soren Kirkegaard constitutes the link between 19th and 20th century Protestant Christian thought. He reacted against the liberalism of the German schools and yet his subjectivism sowed the seeds of a new and more radical deconstruction of faith. The first link in the chain is to Karl Barth, (1886 – 1968) the magisterial Swiss theologian who insisted that in the

aftermath of the First World War, all attempts to baptise progress, Hegelian and otherwise, could not address the problems of evil, conflict and suffering. Barth developed a dialectical theology the poles of which concerned the rupture of the relationship between God and Man through sin rather than the realisation of God in the historical process. His revisionist neo-orthodoxy, however, retained Kirkegaard's individualism and aversion to rationalisation. Other elements, especially his reworking of predestination, persuaded some that he was a closet universalist. His commitment to biblical criticism and his socialism made him an ambiguous figure for classical Calvinists who yearned for a return to the purity of the Reformed religion. He is an interesting and attractive figure in many ways, not least for his vigorous opposition to fascism and his ability to interest Roman Catholic theologians.

Those who followed in Barth's wake, notably the new German seekers of the historical Jesus, were less restrained in their quest to unearth the supposed core of revelation within the Scriptures. Rudolf Bultmann used Strauss against Strauss by proposing a grand project of demythologising the Scriptures, peeling back all those elements that allegedly obscured the clarity of the historical Christ. He himself eventually settled for the Christ of faith, for his anti-ecclesiastical historical scepticism could allow him to do no other. Other Barthian children resorted to philosophy, as once had their 19th century forebears, and again with an increasing tendency toward a radical refashioning of the Christian narrative. Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965) embraced existentialism, another of Kirkegaard's legacies, and presented Christianity as addressing the fundamental antinomies of human existence. Meanwhile, secularising trends in western societies gathered pace, particularly after the Second World War with the privatisation of religion fuelled both by consumerism and the individualistic pietism or evangelical and charismatic movements within the western churches.

Rome – a tradition in transition

Rome was not entirely unaffected by these developments in Protestant theology. In the aftermath of Vatican 1 there was initially a reaction against Catholic modernism in its hey-

day between 1890 and 1910 led by Pius X. That there should have been such attempts to present Catholicism in a manner more consistent with contemporary western thought is due in part at least to the diplomacy and more open attitudes of Pius' predecessor, Leo XIII who conferred the cardinal's hat on Newman, suspected at the time, unfairly in retrospect, of liberalism on account of his teaching concerning the 'Development of Doctrine'. Leo encouraged a new generation of young Catholic theologians to explore ways in which the findings of biblical criticism and the insights of contemporary philosophy could be harnessed to the Church's task. The work of Alfred Loisy (1857 – 1940), Baron Friederich von Hugel (1852 – 1925) and the French Archbishop Mignot advanced the modernist case. Loisy's work: "The Gospel and the Church" (1902) for the first time challenged the presuppositions and agenda of liberal Protestantism as proposed by Sabatier and Harnack on historical and theological grounds and insisted that Christianity and Christology could not be divorced.

Such an encouraging advance in Catholic apologetic was, however, strangled at birth by Rome. She would brook no change in the tenets of Thomist scholastic orthodoxy, ill-suited as these were to the challenges of contemporary western thought. Like Lamennais before him, Loisy retired a broken man and was eventually excommunicated. Others took up the fight including Father George Tyrrell (1861 – 1909) but these too were silenced. By 1910 Pius X had extinguished the movement, laid upon all ordinands an anti-modernist oath and had set back the cause of Catholic biblical research by a generation. The Pontifical Biblical Commission created by Leo XIII was hijacked by conservatives and used to enforce strict adherence to anachronistic and outdated orthodoxies. After the death of Pius X in 1914, however, and under the more enlightened guidance of Benedict XV, the modernists achieved their posthumous victory both in respect of biblical research and the embrace of doctrinal development. Rome at last began to engage with the modern world but not by aping the liberal Protestantism of the German schools. Indeed by its commitment to the vitality of a dynamic Catholicism it was able to promulge dogmatically what hitherto had been simply aspects of ancient Catholic piety, most notably the definition of the Dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

Seen in the light of the struggles of two previous generations, the radicalism of the Second Vatican Council seems less surprising. When John XXIII announced his intention to convene this Council in 1959 the world was astonished but not more so than when it convened in 1962 and the decrees and the reforms were rolled out in the succeeding years. The Pope did not live to see the end of the Council and it is fair to say that his successor, Paul VI applied a sometimes none-too gentle papal foot to the brake. Nonetheless, and as a result of the preceding ecumenical and liturgical movements, the Council reshaped Roman Catholicism to respond with an open spirit to the challenges of the 20th Century. The post-conciliar Church did not emerge unscathed however. Priestly and religious vocations fell significantly, especially in the west. Maybe this would have happened anyway and perhaps more severely in the absence of such a Council. Nonetheless such problems are timely reminders that recouping the losses of the Enlightenment may require deeper surgery and longer term treatment.

Protestant Revolutions and the Emergence of New Religious Movements

For the Protestant traditions the 1960's were also a time of ferment right across the spectrum of belief and practice but the outcomes have been much more chaotic. This has to be seen in the context of the social, cultural and intellectual revolutions sweeping across Europe and America at this time and the general permeability of Protestant traditions to social change. Opposition to the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, capitalist economics and a generational shift challenging all established beliefs and structures pitted the younger generation against the values and achievements of their parents. The 60's convulsed the reformed churches by stimulating new religious movements, Christian and non-Christian that assumed the shape and ideology of the alienated groups that clamoured for reform on behalf of their constituencies. So theologies now become clothed with adjectival prefaces and their pioneers become heroes for particular causes, honoured with professorial chairs in academia. Theological creativity came with a great cost in that new ideas followed sectarian interests and failed to provide a coherent platform across the west as a whole.

The list of these theologies is impressive and has continued to grow unabated since. So in the first wave there was black theology, feminist theology, process theology, liberation theology, queer theology, existential theology, secular theology, non-realist theology, death of God theology. In the second wave and with the rise of radically relativising post modernism, there was added deconstructive theology, reconstructive theology, narrative theology, weak theology and radical orthodoxy (nothing to do with Orthodoxy!)

The first wave theologies generated intolerance of opposition by disallowing contrary perspectives, unreconstructed language and unreformed customs. Orwell's "newspeak" seems uncannily prescient in this respect. Indeed there has been a pervasive irrationality in the whole movement especially when considering the anti-intellectual, mystical and highly subjectivised variants of neo-Christian pieties influenced by ecstatic and even New Age spiritualities, as we shall now examine.

The roots of this trend can be seen at the very margins of Pentecostalism, itself and initially a respectable outgrowth of the Wesleyan Holiness Movement at the turn of the 20th century. The first distributed form of Pentecostalism in the historic denominations manifested itself as the Charismatic Movement which brought some early promise of renewal and reform to the arid intellectualism of the first wave. Later variants, however, became more tangential even to Christianity. Some Spirit-infused groups for example paganised, notably the Findhorn community, and merged imperceptibly into the New Age spectrum whilst others practised a more overtly Christian form of ecstatic Spirit-possession, typified by the so-called Toronto blessing, which went well beyond glossolalia into altered states of consciousness. These rapidly fragmenting and ideologically eccentric theologies have spawned new forms of Christian worship, ecstatic, syncretistic, impressionistic and programmatic (that is with a strong sense of indoctrination through emotional manipulation and linguistic deformation, often cultic in character). Casualties of this growth in neo-Christian cults have included, notoriously, the mass murder-suicides of 909 members of Jim Jones' "People's Temple" in Guyana in 1978. We have then the ultimate irony that by the close of the 20th century, the

Age of Reason had sired so many Children of Unreason, not a few of them not just “dotty” but a public menace. The contemporary Protestant new religious movements, apart from evangelical groups reverting to old orthodoxies in new dress, have arguably largely lost their way in a thicket of subjectivism and illuminism. Even contemporary forms of gnosticism do not now seem to be too distant a prospect. What binds all these post-Christian movements together aside from their anti-intellectual subjectivism is a rejection of political engagement.

In other respects the traditional Protestant rejection of ecclesiastical authority continues unchecked and has evolved into more fantastical forms. Never have conspiracy theories been so active in the religious sphere ... the basic assumption being that traditional Christianity has displaced a more authentic esoteric form and that this should be recovered, endorsed and promoted. Dan Brown and John Allegro have made a decent living out of such fancies. It is the Area 51 zone of neo-gnostic dissent; fascinating stuff but simply a reflection of a post-Christian culture blown hither and thither by the latest theory and often taken by the gullible to be gospel truth. Fundamentalism is indeed a many headed beast! At the other liberal end of the Protestant spectrum the opposing tendency is also observed: an ideological appropriation of Christian social ethics within a relativizing postmodern theological framework.

Taken as a whole we should probably therefore characterise these diversifying and mutually incompatible neo-Christianities as New Religious Movements rather than “Protestant” since this term has largely ceased to have any coherent meaning. The driving force behind them all is a consumerist notion of religion, perhaps even a stronger secularising factor than the division of Church and State which allows space for such choices to be made. Heterodox Christianity has become a veritable smorgasbord of proliferating religious options which ultimately can only command the attention of the person that chooses what form it shall take next, together with his or her close associates and other hangers on. Notwithstanding the iterations of atheism on offer, unbelief must seem to some a more attractive uncomplicated landscape. This of course is where the two secularisms, religious and non-religious, meet.

Green Shoots of Orthodoxy?

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 had a profound effect on the social consciousness of our mortality and the fragility of life in this world. Generation Z, conceived by their predecessors, the Millennials, have largely disavowed the rampant hedonism and materialism of their parent's generation. Although still living within a pluralistic space of competing philosophies, ideologies and religions, those 20-something young adults of the 2020's who are searching for Christ are being attracted to the Orthodox Church as the authentic expression of Christianity. Much of the evidence of this shift in social perception and spiritual renewal is at best anecdotal but arguably well founded. It is to be hoped that the increased numbers of those being received by baptism or chrismation into the Church really does represent long awaited green shoots of recovery (longer term) for Christianity, particularly in the west, although by no means limited to the west.