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Churches in Europe and the Challenge of Cultural Witness

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It is a commonplace sentiment that the church in Europe is declining. Devotees of the secularization thesis would suggest that this is an inevitable process in any modern and sophisticated society, because the more prosperous, technologically proficient, and advanced a society is, the less religious it becomes. Yet, a strong case can also be made that this is a case of Western exceptionalism. In fact, 85% of the people on this planet claim adherence to a faith tradition ([World Population Review 2022](#)). Furthermore, almost all religions will experience growth in the 21st century as an extensive study by the [Pew Research Center \(2015\)](#) shows. China is fast becoming the world's largest economy, and yet religious faith, and in particular the Christian church, has grown there in ways unimaginable in recent history. The same is true in other non-Western countries where Christian minorities are growing larger, and is particularly true in Africa where, in the context of the development of African countries, the growth of Christianity is one of the most remarkable social movements in global history in the past century.

Much has been written about the reasons for the decline of the church in Europe and what might be done to reverse it. A sizeable literature has grown around such initiatives as Church Planting, Fresh Expressions of Church, the New Evangelisation, and other attempts to grow the church in Western European countries. To date, however, relatively little has been written about the church's public witness.

Several voices have pointed to the churches' lack of public voice as hampering attempts to grow the church at the grassroots level. As the Anglican priest Peter Owen [Jones \(2022\)](#) writes:

Parish priests like me operate at the coal face: we baptise; we marry; we bury; we console where we can. This is the work of the Church of England at the micro-level. Where the Church does not have a compelling presence is at the national level, the macro level. It is here that there has been a complete lack of engagement, of witness, of imagination . . . Without effective national witness, work at the parish level has been made far harder.

One of the features of the increasing marginalization of the Christian churches in Western Europe has been the loss of a prominent Christian voice in public discourse. In many countries, churches retain either an established status within the constitutional and government structures of the nation, for example in the United Kingdom (UK), or retain a privileged place in national life in different ways. Mainstream media will often report on the church when there are deep internal disagreements within the church on wider hot button issues, such as human sexuality or euthanasia, or when there is a scandal within the church, or when there is conflict between the church and government. It is rarer, however, to hear intelligent Christian voices in public discourse, explaining and exploring the nuances of Christian theology.



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In the 1960s, for example, John Robinson's book *Honest to God* (Robinson 1963), proposing a revised understanding of the relationship between God and the world in the light of developments in modern science and culture, was front page news in the UK. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth was featured on the cover of Time Magazine in 1962. It is hard to imagine the pronouncement or profile of a theologian having anything like the same impact today. Theologians continue to produce learned articles, detailed monographs, and extensive discussion on issues in the various branches of theology, yet little of this gets read even in the wider church let alone in secular circles. While there is a clear public role for sociologists, psychologists, geographers, scientists, and specialists in other disciplines, that is rarely true for theologians. In the words of Volf and Croasmun (2019) from Yale University, "[T]he number of people in the pew reading academic theology is negligible . . . (and) the wider public outside Christian communities perceives academic theology as so thoroughly irrelevant that it might as well not exist" (p. 40f.). Neither the world, nor even the church for that matter, seem that interested in what academic theology has to offer.

The occasion for this edition of the Religions journal is the launch of a new initiative within the Church of England seeking to address this issue. The *Centre for Cultural Witness* was set up in September 2022, led by Bishop Graham Tomlin, who until that point had been the Bishop of Kensington in the Diocese of London after a long career in academic theological teaching. The new Centre is based in Lambeth Palace, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, at the invitation of Archbishop Justin Welby. It focusses on three main activities: (i) *Communication*—comprising a major new opinion website offering Christian perspectives on contemporary cultural issues and themes; (ii) *Learning*—a program of training in public communication for senior Christian leaders such as bishops, members of parliament, and community leaders; and (iii) *Research*—projects emerging from partnerships with university theological faculties into aspects of the church's public witness today.

At present, at least in the countries that we as editors stem from, there is a large gulf between the different public spheres, the world of theology, and the church's public witness. The *Center for Cultural Witness* is an attempt to bridge that gap by encouraging theologians to reorient their work outwards as part of the church's public witness, providing a format for such work to find a much wider audience as an explicit part of the church's witness, and generating new avenues of theological enquiry related to the public witness of the church.

The phrase "cultural witness" was deliberately chosen as a way of indicating that this is an attempt not to convince a skeptical world by means of rational argumentation, or to offer yet more theological and historical research abstracted from contemporary life, but to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the particular circumstances of contemporary cultures. "Cultural witness" bears a resemblance to other projects, such as public theology (*Öffentliche Theologie*) in the German speaking world or the discipline of apologetics, yet at the same time lays emphasis in different places from either of these.

The articles in this edition of the journal *Religions* explore various aspects of the church's public witness and, in particular, the theme of "cultural witness".

The opening article by Bishop Graham Tomlin (Center for Cultural Witness, UK) outlines the approach this initiative takes that distinguishes it from previous trends in the discipline of apologetics. Andrew Davison's (Cambridge University, UK) article explores the multifaceted nature of the word "cultural" in the phrase "cultural witness." Ralph Kunz (Zurich University, Switzerland) examines a figure of thought that has gained prominence in the Reformed tradition and for which the concept of the prophetic office has stood. The church is a community that not only reproduces religious knowledge but brings it into public discourse as a provocative voice. Public theology as cultural witness and its Christological implications is the topic of Christine Schliesser's (Zurich/Fribourg University, Switzerland) paper. Discussing the implications of cultural witness on theology, Ulrich Körtner (Vienna University, Austria) deliberates the kind of theology that the church of the future needs. In their co-authored article, Carmody Grey (Durham University, UK) and Oliver Dürri (Fribourg/Zurich University, Switzerland) call for the retirement of the "religion/secular" frame, as these terms increasingly lack salience in our cultures. Cardinal

Reinhard Marx (Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, Germany) tackles the fundamental question of how viable, reliable, and sustainable decisions can be reached in our quest to contribute to the common good.

Benjamin Schliesser's contribution (Bern University, Switzerland) portrays innovative and distinct features of local Christ groups of the first decades, who were also forced to face the challenge of cultural witness. Renie Chow Choy (Westcott House/St Paul's Cathedral, UK) encourages a discussion on how broadening the engagement with sensitive memories associated with the cultural heritage of the Church of England can enhance its visibility in the public sphere. Benno van den Toren's (Groningen University, The Netherlands) paper addresses the nature of and questions about the church's public witness in a multi-faith context.

Alistair McGrath (Oxford University, UK) engages key themes of Tomáš Halík's approach to cultural witness in a time of change and uncertainty. Meego Remmel (European Federation of Baptist Churches, Estonia) tackles the issues surrounding church-state relationship in the secularized context of Estonian culture. In his article, Christophe Chalamet (Geneva University, Switzerland) argues for a middle ground between the two temptations of Christians, either to "retreat" from the world, or to more or less completely "merge" with contemporary society. Finally, Sara Schumacher (St. Mellitus College, UK) offers thoughts on the cultural witness of church art and its patronage.

As editors, our hope is that this set of essays stimulates a new engagement between the different public spheres, the world of theology, and the church's public witness, and which helps develop a renewal of confidence in the contribution of Christian faith to the wider discourse of our societies in Western Europe, to the strengthening of the church, and to the flourishing of our communities.

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