POST-CHRISTIAN CHRISTMAS

Posted on December 10, 2014 by Eddie

This means realizing that we are not the majority, and we are not going to force the rest of society to adopt our ways. We are going to have to acknowledge that society has a different view of marriage from us, that we practice business differently and are not typical in how we conduct our affairs, that we use our time and resources differently, and so forth. We are going to have to know who we are better than we have in the past, distinct from the larger society in many ways.
Category: Observations

The United Kingdom is no longer a Christian country.

Actually, I'm not convinced thatÂ it ever was Â a Christian country in the first place - but that's another story.

However, it is true that for a thousand years, our national culture was to a great extent shaped by an interaction with the Christian story. If you were British, you went to church. Whether it made any meaningful difference to your life is an entirely different question, but you went to church. Mission was more or less a meaningful concept because everyone was already involved in church life in some way or another.

It isn't like that today! However, I'm not convinced that we have really got to grips with what this massive cultural change means for the life and witness of the church in Britain today. All too often, we lament the way the church has lost influence and pine for the good old days, rather than getting to grips with contextualising the gospel for the society that we actually live in.

The ever excellent Rollin Grams (surely a candidate for my blog of the year, if only he published more often) has recently posted an excellent piece which explores this issue; with special reference to Christmas. I'm going to post a few paragraphs below, but you really need to go and read his whole post.

> *Living in England some years ago, we were amazed to find children in the local Church of England primary school who did not know what Easter was about and who were encouraged to practice Buddhist meditation as an exercise in the classroom for a religious education class.Â I recently had a student ask, â€œWhat is â€˜Post-Christian?â€™â€ â€"that is!Â When vestiges of Christianity are more likely to show up in a history courseâ€"if even thereâ€"a once Christian society is post-Christian.Â That no country can ever be said to be â€œChristianâ€ is, in my view, an important caveat to this discussion and one that goes all the way back to St. Augustineâ€™s City of God.Â Still, Europe, and the countries it colonized, established an institutional relationship with churches such that Christianity was a powerful force within the culture.Â We call it â€œChristendom,â€ and it is not a neutral story but a story of both great blessing and horrible abuse.Â Laws were passed, hospitals and schools were established, Christian â€œholy daysâ€ were observed, and most people showed up for church services on Sunday morning if not other times during the week.Â Marriage was a covenant relationship between a man and a woman, and people did not live together before marriage, were not sexually active until marriage, did not contemplate same-sex unions (let alone â€˜marriagesâ€™), did not divorceâ€"except as exceptions to the rule, and these rules were what the Church taught and the social institutions and laws of the country, to some extent, supported.*
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> *Again, this is not to say that the society really was Christian, or even that the institutions that*

> *supported the Church and its projects were Christian, or even, for that matter, that the institutional Church was itself Christian!Â Frankly, there was a lot in Christendom that was not at all Christian.Â However, whatever gains were made by the Church to overcome the pagan practices of pre-Christian Europe were gains made by persons seeking to establish a more Christian society.Â And there, by the way, is a history lesson often missing from the classroom today because history is always written by the conquerors, and non-Christian society has, by and large, conquered the Church in Europe, Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa today.*
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> *We need to think a little about the Christianizing of culture before we think further about living as Christians in a post-Christian culture.Â Christmas illustrates the point.Â It was once an important day in pre-Christian Europe.Â Coming just after the winter solstice, the actual day was associated with the god Mithras in Roman religion, a religion originating in what is today Iran.Â In Roman practice, the holiday celebrated the rebirth of the sun-god after the shortest day of the year, and it involved giving gifts and feasting.Â The priests carried wreaths made from evergreen boughs as they processed through the towns and villages during the festival.Â The origin of the Christmas tree in Christian times in Germany may have something to do with sacred trees in German cultureâ€"proposals of its possible history can easily be accessed online.Â With the â€œChristianizationâ€ of the Roman empire, beginning with the first Roman Emperor, Constantine, in 312, such practices needed to change.Â It is one thing to pass a law against gladiatorial shows, slavery, or homosexual practice, but what can be done with holidays?Â People do not easily give up their holidays!Â So, this holiday became a Christian holy day, Christmas, the day of Christâ€™s birth.Â He was not, of course, born on Christmas dayâ€"and we do not know on what day he was born (it would have been at a time of the year when shepherds could be in the fields in Israel, though!)...*
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> *... However, in the West today, the best approach is for Christians to learn how to be a minority witness within a larger society.*
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> *This means realizing that we are not the majority, and we are not going to force the rest of society to adopt our ways.Â We are going to have to acknowledge that society has a different view of marriage from us, that we practice business differently and are not typical in how we conduct our affairs, that we use our time and resources differently, and so forth.Â We are going to have to know who we are better than we have in the past, distinct from the larger society in many ways...*

This gives a feel of where the piece is going. However, he comes up a fascinating idea for a distinctive Christmas celebration. I'm not going to give away any spoilers, so you will have to go and read the whole article. You'll be glad you did.