

Religious monopoly and the loss of religious freedom in Christendom

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse how the developments in the post-apostolic church, and particularly after the Constantinian shift, soon resulted in the loss of religious freedom. In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in mission in the changing contexts of post-Christian societies in the West. Yet most of this research has neglected to examine the relationship between the post-Christendom shift and the previous shift from the persecuted primitive church to the religious-political construct of Christendom. What is more, an examination of the Christendom era contributes to the study of the conditions of religious freedom and persecution. The compulsion to religious uniformity and monopoly resulted inevitably in the loss of religious freedom over many centuries. In the final analysis, the differing assessments of Constantinianism depend on the respective eschatological and ecclesiological view.

Keywords Religious freedom and persecution, Christendom era, Constantinian Shift, ecclesiastical institution, imperial church, compulsory church, enforced uniformity, abuse of power, from martyrs to inquisitors, concept of discipleship, non-conformist movements.

At the second assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, 1954, Edmund Schlink delivered a remarkable address on the main theme “Christ – the Hope of the World,” which was contrary to the prevailing optimistic eschatological expectations and left some delegates and reporters shocked and annoyed.² The remarkable thing is how he connected the massive persecution of Christians in his

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² Eugene M. Skibbe, *Edmund Schlink: Bekenner im Kirchenkampf, Lehrer der Kirche, Vordenker der Ökumene* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 102–104.

generation with the eschatological way of the church and with biblical ecclesiology: The church has to follow her Lord through suffering to glory. Therefore, not the recognized and privileged church, but the powerless, suffering church is the manifestation of the glory of Christ. Paradoxically, the church which is dying with Christ is the triumphant one. The Heidelberg theologian concedes that even church history does not only glorify God, but time and again it is also a scandal. But it is not only the world that will pass away, but also the outward form of the church.³ In retrospect, it is striking how these statements run parallel to much of the ongoing debate on the proper shape of the church at the end of the Christendom era and the downside of this long-lasting symbiosis of church, community and state.

1. Developments or changes before the Constantinian shift

Even without unrealistically idealising the New Testament churches,⁴ it is noticeable that the bulk of the Christian movement was barely able to maintain the original course as early as in the post-apostolic age. Murray mentions that “Christendom,” as an alliance of church and state, “advanced both through startlingly rapid changes” in fourth-century Rome and “gradual evolution” of “trends already apparent in previous decades.”⁵ The local apostolic churches had been responsible for testing prophetic utterances and “weigh carefully what is said” (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:20; 1 John 4:1).⁶ Yet already in the *Didache* in the early second century the prophets were removed from the critical judgement of the church. This had serious consequences, as the bishops took over the role of the prophets and, as bishops, they were also removed from the critical judgement of the church.⁷ Already the apostolic father Ignatius of Antioch, who was martyred some time between 98 and 117, justified the unity of the church not in Christ, but in the hierarchical organization of the bishops – according to Hauss, an incorrect approach that led to the papal church.⁸ In contrast thereto, according to Ladd, the churches in the New Testament “were bound together by no ecclesiastical ties or formal authority, they had a profound sense of oneness.”⁹ And the authority of apostles and prophets “was

³ Edmund Schlink, “Christus - die Hoffnung für die Welt” in Foko Lüpsen (ed), *Evanston Dokumente: Berichte und Reden auf der Weltkirchenkonferenz in Evanston* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1954), 135-144.

⁴ Cf. David J. Bosch, *Witness to the world* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980), 102.

⁵ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 23.

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The first epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1987), 689-695. F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (WBC: Taco, TX: Word, 1982), 125-127. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC: Taco, TX: Word, 1984), 214-220.

⁷ Klaus Wengst, *Schriften des Urchristentums II: Didache (Apostellehre), Barnabasbrief, Zweiter Clemensbrief, Schrift an Diognet* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 43 and 63.

⁸ Friedrich Hauss, *Väter der Christenheit* (Wuppertal and Zürich: R. Brockhaus, 1991), 5.

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A theology of the New Testament* (Guildford and London: Lutterworth, 1975), 353.

spiritual and not appointive or official or legal.”¹⁰ Peters reverses Cyprian’s well known relationship between Church and bishop:

The historic dictum of Cyprian, “Where the bishop is, the church is,” finds its reversal in the biblical order, “Where the church is, the bishop [overseer] is,” or, “There is no bishop [overseer] where there is no church.” The church makes the bishop and not the bishop the church. The church is God’s priority. It may not be so in human organizations.¹¹

Apparently, the challenging transition into the post-apostolic era led to altered understandings of both the unity of the church and the authority in her. These modifications had far-reaching effects: As Hinson comments, when Constantine “sought to effect unity among Christians” for the unity of his empire “he set Christianity on the track of persecution that has cast a shadow on its history ever since.” The persecution that Christians “had themselves experienced at times” did “not even equal the pain they inflicted on non-Christians and even on other Christians as they gave religious sanction to the state’s coercive powers.” It is a dubious progress of Constantinianism, that by “the time of Theodosius I, intolerance had become a public virtue.”¹²

As Baker puts it, the “period from AD 100 to 325 was perilous for Christianity. Two dangers confronted it: (1) hostility and violence from the pagan government and (2) corruption and division from within.” Eventually, the “nature of Christianity had been corrupted by 325. Changes had come in several overlapping areas.” He denotes four of these areas: In the nature of faith; in the nature of the New Testament church; in the nature of ecclesiastical authority; and in the nature of worship.¹³

From a Roman Catholic perspective, however, the changes after the close of the apostolic era were logical and consistent. They were even necessary to combat the Gnostic heresy as well as non-Catholic churches:

¹⁰ Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 353. See also Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 1: *Grundlegung. Von Jesus zu Paulus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 201. Cf. Michael Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 175-176.

¹¹ George W. Peters, *A biblical theology of missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 220. Cf. Maximilian J. Hözl, ‘Peters, George W.’, in Traugott Bautz (ed), *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, vol. 35, 1014-1035. See also Leith Anderson: *A Church for the 21st century: Bringing change to your church to meet the challenges of a changing society* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 225.

¹² E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the dawn of the Middle Ages* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 206-207.

¹³ Robert A. Baker, *A summary of Christian history* (ed. John M. Landers; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 13 and 44.

As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, it adapted itself to contemporary social and political structures. By the latter half of the second century organizational complexification had occurred in the form of synods and councils, and in the emergence of the monarchical episcopacy. The latter was especially linked with the effort to combat certain rigorist movements. Among the major bishop-theologians who fashioned an ecclesiology over against Gnosticism, Novatianism and Donatism were Irenaeus, Cyprian and Augustine respectively.¹⁴

Remarkably, these ecclesiological modifications were made in the rivalry against concurrent movements – in order to create, as Murray puts it, a “united church across the Empire undisturbed by non-conformist movements.”¹⁵ The “old catholic fathers” (180-250), like Irenaeus of Lyons (about 135-200) and Cyprian of Carthage (about 200-258), laid the foundations for the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁶ After the Constantinian shift, the church father Augustine of Hippo (354-430) became so instrumental in shaping “Christendom” that he can be considered a “pioneer of Christendom” and “its main architect.”¹⁷ According to Diprose, with Cyprian “the Catholic church ceased being the universal church and became the Roman Catholic church.” And “orthodoxy came to mean obedience to the ecclesiastical institution thought to mediate God’s grace through the sacraments.”¹⁸ With the conversion of Constantine the meaning of the term “catholic” underwent a fundamental change. McGrath observed that “By the end of the fourth century, the term *ecclesia catholica* (“the catholic church”) had come to mean “the imperial church” – that is, the only legal religion within the Roman Empire.” Therefore, any “other form of belief, including Christian beliefs, which diverged from the mainstream, was declared to be illegal.”¹⁹

In Brunner’s view the origin of the Roman Church lies in two facts “which reciprocally influenced each other: the sacramental view of salvation and the assertion of

¹⁴ Richard P. McBrien, “Church,” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds), *A new dictionary of Christian theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 108-110, here 109. Interestingly, against the Novatians, Cyprian insisted that “orthodoxy alone is insufficient for union with the one church. True membership requires unity with the bishops on whom the church is founded, with the successors of Peter at their center (109).”

¹⁵ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 80.

¹⁶ Armin Sierszyn, *2000 Jahre Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1 (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1995), 168. Cf. Kurt Aland, *Die Frühzeit der Kirche in Lebensbildern* (Giessen and Basel: Brunnen, 1990), 109, 141.

¹⁷ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 75, 79.

¹⁸ Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the development of Christian thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 128.

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, *Christian theology: An introduction* (Oxford, UK/Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994), 424.

formal legal authority.”²⁰ This development started with the new understanding of the Lord’s Supper as the Sacrament of the altar that turned the brotherhood in Christ into the sacramental priestly church.²¹ From this change arose a second: Into the “spiritual organism” of the Pauline *Ekklesia*²² intruded “a quite different kind of order, the formal authority of jurisdiction or power of command.”²³ A third and “especially important step in the development into the Roman Catholic Church” was a new understanding of tradition (cf. *paradosis* in the New Testament) by “the coupling of office and tradition.”²⁴ This is where the Catholic understanding of continuity is involved:

Since Irenaeus the first principle holds good, the guarantors of the trustworthiness of tradition are the bishops; since Cyprian the second principle holds good – the Holy Spirit is bound up with the office, guaranteed by the office, and therefore *that* Church *cannot* err, which is episcopally organized and guaranteed by the continuity of transmission of office. From now on there is a central interest in unbroken lists of bishops as a proof in the unbroken tradition.²⁵

A further highly significant step in the “development of the *Ekklesia* into the Church” is what Brunner calls “The Perfecting of the Holy Church Institution.”²⁶ It is the transition from “the persecuted ‘confessing Church’ to the popular Church (*Jedermannskirche*) of Constantine.”²⁷

2. Christendom after the Constantinian shift

Historians argue over the question of whether the Christian movement needed the historical conversion of Constantine²⁸ in order that it could develop from a minority

²⁰ Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics III: The Christian doctrine of the church, faith and the consummation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2002 [1962]), 60.

²¹ Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 66. Cf. Gunnar Westin, *Geschichte des Freikirchentums*, 2nd ed. (Kassel: Oncken, 1958), 17: “Fast, but not without protest, the Christian movement was transformed into a sacramentalistic official church since the mid-second century.” The English translation is mine.

²² Brunner’s reduction of the early church to the Pauline *Ekklesia* could be questioned, but that is beyond the scope of the present analysis. Cf. Christian A. Schwarz, *Die Dritte Reformation: Paradigmenwechsel in der Kirche* (Emmelsbühl: C & P, 1993), 19.

²³ Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69. Cf. Sierszyn, 2000 *Jahre Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 1, 146-147.

²⁶ Emil Brunner, *Dogmatik III* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1960), 90.

²⁷ *Ibid.* For “Luther’s urgent desire” to replace the word “Church” with “congregation” see Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM, 1949), 141.

²⁸ James Stevenson (ed), *A new Eusebius* (London: S.P.C.K., 1974), 298. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Staaten und Großmächte: Probleme staatlicher Ordnung in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1960), 104-108. For recent studies on Constantine’s impact on the church, see John D. Roth (ed), *Constantine revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian debate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013) and Edward L. Smither (ed), *Rethinking Constantine: History, theology, and legacy* (Eugene, OR: Pick-

religion to a world religion.²⁹ Neither is there, according to Shenk, any consensus among them “as to whether the rise of Constantinianism was a positive development or not.” But historians are in agreement that “the church was decisively changed by the decisions taken by emperor Constantine after A.D. 313” – decisions “that ultimately led to Christianity being recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 under Emperor Theodosius I.”³⁰ Undoubtedly, this change led to the increase of nominal Christianity at the expense of faithfulness.³¹ In contrast, the period leading up to Constantine is commonly characterised by historians as “the age of the martyrs.”³² The period from 250 to 450 has been called by Johnson “From Martyrs to Inquisitors.”³³ In any case, for most of the Christian era this shift fundamentally modified and defined the understanding of “the Church” and its role within the state and society.

On the one hand, many “negative developments regarding Church and mission” had started very early. Bosch even argues that they “could in embryo already be detected in the early Church de-scribed in the New Testament.” On the other hand it is obvious that

a new era dawned with Constantine’s victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome on 28th October, AD 312. Few, if any events in history had such a far-reaching and lasting effect on the Church. The phenomenon known as Europe has its origin here, as has the idea of the “Christian West” or “Christendom.” Constantine’s victory has consequences up to this day. In fact, it is only in recent decades that the full significance of those events at the beginning of the fourth century has begun to dawn upon us.³⁴

wick, 2014).

²⁹ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Urchristliche Mission* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2002), 1497-1498. Cf. Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 107. Cf. Rodney Stark, *The rise of Christianity: How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 7-8: Stark estimates a constant growth rate of 40% per decade during the first several centuries. In AD 250 Christians would make up 1.9% of the estimated 60 million population, in AD 300 10.5% and in AD 350 56.5%. Cf. Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A post-Christendom perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 80. Cf. also Stephen Neill, *A history of Christian missions* (The Pelican History of the Church, 6: Middlesex, UK/Baltimore, MD/Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1964), 46.

³⁰ Wilbert R. Shenk, “New wineskins for new wine.” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29/2 (2005), 73-79, here 74.

³¹ Richard Howell, “Christian suffering and martyrdom: An opportunity.” in *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 2/2 (2009), 13-27, here 16.

³² David F. Wright, “The testimony of blood: The charisma of martyrdom,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 160 (October-December 2003), 387-397, here 387.

³³ Paul Johnson, *A history of Christianity* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), 67-122.

³⁴ Bosch, *Witness to the world*, 102.

It should be added, however, that the “Constantinian story” – according to Stone, the “story of the church’s forgetting its journey and making itself at home in the world”³⁵ – is not limited solely to the person of Roman emperor Constantine the Great (270 or 288 - 337), his own intentions, or his lifespan. The relationship of church and world that is named after him, “has its origins in decisions, actions, and forces at work prior to Constantine and takes further and ongoing shape in the century after him up through at least Augustine.”³⁶

At this point it may be useful to briefly consider both Europe’s specific role in regard to the Constantinian story and some benefits of this long lasting relationship. In particular, the issue of Europe’s rapidly diminishing Christian identity is highly relevant in the present situation. The current quest for that continent’s “soul” touches on European interdependence with the Christendom narrative. It can be argued that Christianity had an even greater formative influence on Europe than its ancient heritage.³⁷ According to Koch and Smith, it was only in the late seventeenth century that “‘Europe’ replaced ‘Christendom’ or the ‘Christian Commonwealth’ as the prevalent term.”³⁸ Certainly, the formation of a Christian-oriented cultural area and a Christian identity on the European continent was one of the greatest achievements of Constantianism. The loss of that identity and the resulting spiritual and moral vacuum has incalculable consequences for the future European development. Nussbaum aptly observed the irony that “just as Christians agree to bury the concept of Christendom, radical Muslims emerge on a mission to expand ‘shariadom.’”³⁹ An increasingly post-Christian Europe can hardly put forward alternatives to the growing influence of Islam, nor to the New Atheism or what John Paul II termed the “culture of death.”⁴⁰ In retrospect, a further important benefit of the Constantinian story can be identified. Despite its long-lasting repression of dissenters, Christendom’s culture reluctantly, though repeatedly, had to provide the starting point for several Christian renewal movements which more or less anticipated the end of the Constantinian era.

³⁵ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The theology and practice of Christian witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007), 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁷ Günther Lottes, ‘Formationsprinzipien der europäischen Geschichte’, in Dieter Holtmann and Peter Riemer (eds), *Europa, Einheit und Vielfalt: eine interdisziplinäre Betrachtung* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2001), 129-152, here 134.

³⁸ Richard Koch and Christ Smith, *Suicide of the West* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), 15.

³⁹ Stan Nussbaum, *A reader’s guide to transforming mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 153.

⁴⁰ Eric Kaufman, *Shall the religious inherit the earth? Demography and politics in the twenty-first century* (London: Profile Books, 2010), 181-182. Vladimir Palko, *Die Löwen kommen: Warum Europa und Amerika auf eine neue Tyrannei zusteuern* (Kißlegg: Fe-Medienverlag, 2015), 479-502. Donald De Marco and Benjamin Wicker, *Architects of the culture of death* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 18.

However, instead of romantic nostalgia for “the brilliant past ...when Europe was a Christian country”⁴¹ there needs to be a critical assessment of the quality and depth of its spiritual life and practices. In the words of Hunsberger, it “was precisely the problem with Christendom in the end, that finally the society had the shell of the Christian faith’s perspective and ethos while no longer holding to its essential faith.”⁴² This reflects the typical dilemma of Christendom. On the one hand, it offered nationwide basic networks of pastoral care. And on the other hand, this religious infrastructure mainly produced nominal Christianity.⁴³ Thus, it appears that by establishing cultural Christianity, Constantinianism demonstrated its major contributions and weaknesses at the same time. The very concept of discipleship became obsolete in a Christianised society, where the “world” ceased to be an antonym to the Church.⁴⁴ “The close connection between church and discipleship remained as long as Christians were a persecuted minority in a predominantly pagan society.”⁴⁵ However, as a Catholic thinker states, “a new crisis for the Church arose after the conversion of Constantine, when Christianity became the established religion of the empire.”⁴⁶ In addition to the “interior discipleship” of all Christians, discipleship became associated with religious orders and the concept of priesthood.⁴⁷ The priesthood of all believers was replaced by a vicarious priesthood of sacred ministers. The simple Christians lost their spiritual birthrights and became dependent on the hierarchy of priests. During Constantine’s time church membership was constituted simply by infant baptism and subsequent catechism lessons. Now the church is a national church and some years later it will be the mandatory compulsory church, to which everybody *must* belong. As Brunner further observes, now it is not only “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”:

⁴¹ Novalis, *Abendländische Vision* (Heidelberg: Kemper, 1947), 18.

⁴² George R. Hunsberger, *The story that chooses us: A tapestry of missional vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 84.

⁴³ Cf. Edward Rommen, *Namenschristentum: Theologisch-soziologische Erwägungen* (Bad Liebenzell: VLM, 1985), 62-81. See also Anthony R. Cross, *Recovering the evangelical sacrament: Baptisma Semper Reformandum* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 86.

⁴⁴ Heribert Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung: Ein epochales Schlagwort in seiner Bedeutung für die Zukunft der christlichen Kirchen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1971), 262.

⁴⁵ Avery Dulles, S.J., *Models of the Church: A critical assessment of the church in all its aspects*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 212-213.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Cf. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 211. Cf. Bonhoeffer’s warning about cheap grace: “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate,” whereas “costly grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of discipleship* (London: SCM, 1956), 38-39. Cf. also Emil Brunner, *Offenbarung und Vernunft: Die Lehre von der christlichen Glaubenserkenntnis* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 2007), 183.

Outside this church there is no possibility of existence – within the Roman Empire. This state of affairs lasted practically to the French Revolution, even in the Churches of the Reformation, which took up the same ground as the national Church of Constantine and the compulsory Church of Theodosius.⁴⁸

Similarly, Bosch has stated that, “The first heretic was executed as early as AD 385” and highlighted the dramatic change that had taken place: “Where prior to Constantine, it involved a risk to be a member of the Church, it now became dangerous not to be a member.” Even the large Reformation Churches continued more or less the tradition of the Theodosian compulsory church and discredited non-conformist churches as “sects.”⁴⁹ The contrast between Christendom’s forced kind of “Christianity” and the original Christianity could hardly be greater. While the liberating good news transcends this world and its transitory powers, the gospel had been misused in and for a monopolistic and totalitarian institution for over a thousand years. Now there was no choice: “It was now clear and certain for everyone to see: the Church is this holy institution to which it is almost impossible not to belong. Anyone who opposed this development either became a schismatic or a heretic.”⁵⁰ This was not only relevant for opposing pagans but also for Christians in non-conformist movements. This historical fact suggests that Christians from non-conformist backgrounds can reach out to non-Christians less prejudiced – at least there is some common ground.

Ironically, Augustine, whose texts became instrumental for both the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation,⁵¹ and who is regarded as “the greatest theologian of ancient times, contributed not a little to the development of the compulsory church” – by his anti-Donatist writings which culminated in the famous-notorious “compel them to come in!” (*cogite intrare!*).⁵² The Greek term for “compel”⁵³

⁴⁸ Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 70-71. On “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” and “extra Christum nulla salus,” see Walter Klaiber, *Ruf und Antwort: Biblische Grundlagen einer Theologie der Evangelisation* (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 142-143. Bosch, *Witness to the world*, 103.

⁴⁹ Schwarz, *Die Dritte Reformation*, 194.

⁵⁰ Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 71.

⁵¹ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 2.

⁵² Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 71. Cf. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, 117, for Las Casas’ different interpretation as “Persuade them to enter.” For the parable of the weeds, which Augustine also used for his anti-separatist teaching, see Frederick Dale Brunner, *Matthew, a commentary*, vol. 2 (Dallas et al: Word, 1990), 501, and *Joachim Jeremias Die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1956), 160.

⁵³ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *A linguistic key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1980), 185: “The compelling was by persuasion (Plummer).” Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1988), 101, gives a milder meaning for Luke 14:23, namely (strongly) urge, invite

(KJV, NIV, RSV) or “urge” (CEB, NET, NLT) *anagkason* is used in Luke 14:23 “of course, not in the sense of external compulsion, but as in Matthew 14:22, Mark 6:45, and also in classical Greek, of moral and logical constraint (Zahn, in loc.).” Geldenhuys concludes: “The single servant should not use physical violence, and those who refused were not compelled to go by outward force.”⁵⁴

Augustine is called the ideologue of the Constantinian shift.⁵⁵ Murray argues that “Constantine laid the foundations of Christendom,” while “its main architect was Augustine.”⁵⁶ In this role, Augustine embodies some of the contradictions of this system: On one hand, he “strongly advocated the cult of the martyr-saints.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, as Frend noted, “he accepted coercion by the state among the means at the church’s disposal to enforce unity.” As a result, his “forced interpretation of Luke 14.23 . . . was to have grave effects on the history of religious persecution in the Middle Ages and in Reformation times.” Augustine’s view of the “uniqueness and unity of the Catholic Church, with resultant attitudes towards dissenters, played a fundamental part in his theology and its legacy to the West.”⁵⁸

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to detail Christendom’s mission to followers of other religions. In summary, it can be said that there was no room for religious liberty for the individual from 380, when Emperor Theodosius established Christianity as the prescribed state religion of the Roman Empire, until the final dissolution of the “*sacrum imperium*” in the wake of the bourgeois revolutions about 1500 years later. According to Catholic theologian Hilpert, the close interlinking of religious and secular rule led to the suppression of pagan religions and Jews, the persecution of “Heretics,” and to violent actions against non-Christian peoples (forced baptisms, crusades, colonisation).⁵⁹ However, it is also necessary to correct certain biased presentations and the resulting popular prejudices. The new, revisionist Crusades historiography is a relevant example of such corrections.⁶⁰

(urgently).

⁵⁴ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 396. See also Theodor Zahn, *Das Evangelium des Lucas* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1988), 549.

⁵⁵ Kurt Flasch, *Augustin: Einführung in sein Denken* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1980), 171.

⁵⁶ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 75. Cf. Harry Lee Poe, *Christian witness in a postmodern world* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 77: “Augustine invented Christendom in the early fifth century when he wrote *The City of God*.”

⁵⁷ Josef Ton, *Suffering, martyrdom and rewards in heaven* (Wheaton, IL: The Romanian Missionary Society, 2007), 368.

⁵⁸ W.H.C. Frend, “Augustinianism,” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds), *A new dictionary of Christian theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 55-58, here 56. For Thomas Aquinas’s theological reasons for persecutions of heretics see Ulrich H. J. Körnter, “Wahrheit und Toleranz,” in *Theologische Beiträge* 43 (2012), 187-189.

⁵⁹ Konrad Hilpert, “Religionsfreiheit,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd ed, vol 8, 1048-1051, here 1049.

⁶⁰ For a collection of popular ideas about the crusades see Rodney Stark, *God’s battalions: The case for*

3. Consequences for non-conformist churches and Jews

The Donatists defined the relationship between use of force and the church exactly the opposite way: The true Church is the one that suffers persecution, not the one that persecutes! And their leader Donatus (313-355) asked the fundamental question: What has the emperor to do with the Church? (*Quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?*).⁶¹ Interestingly, other non-conformist movements like the Waldensians argued with the same compelling logic.⁶² But that is not all: Even Augustine himself was one of the theologians who declared suffering a mark of the Church: “From Abel until the end of time the pilgrimage of the church proceeds between the persecution of the world and the consolations of God.”⁶³ But in the same context the “heretics” and their heresies are seen as persecution from within and “the church of Christ,” for example, the only legal church in the Roman Empire, is now authorized to inflict a “just persecution on the wicked.” In Augustine’s view,

Donatists are not the persecuted, but rather the persecutors. They tear apart the body of Christ when they assault the unity of the church. There is an unjust persecution which the wicked inflict on the church of Christ and a just persecution which the church of Christ inflicts on the wicked (*ep.* 185.2.11). The deaths that Donatists suffered at the hands of authorities are just punishments (*c. ep. Parm.* 1.8.13). Catholics actually desired the spiritual salvation of the Donatists. Motivated by love, Catholics hope to correct Donatists and bring them back to truth (*ep.* 185.7). If Catholics must punish the Donatists, this does not constitute martyrdom but only a corrective action.⁶⁴

Here the ideology of the outward “unity of the church” had become an all-devouring *Moloch*.⁶⁵ It even justified the persecution of other Christian groups. Such a development can hardly be rationalised with a different mentality and cultural context in Augustine’s time – it is a tragic denial of the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence (e.g. Luke 9:54-55) that also resisted the attempt at privileged monopolisation (Mark

the Crusades (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

⁶¹ Flasch, *Augustin*, 159, and ad Donat. post coll. 31, 53 PL 43, 684.

⁶² Amadeo Molnar, *Die Waldenser: Geschichte und europäisches Ausmaß einer Ketzerbewegung* (Berlin: Union, 1973), 374-375.

⁶³ Augustinus, *Die Gottesbürgerschaft: De Civitate Dei XVIII* (Frankfurt a. M. and Hamburg: Fischer, 1961), 243-245. Cf. “The Bad Urach statement” in Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (eds), *Suffering, persecution and martyrdom: Theological reflections* (Johannesburg: AcadSA and Bonn: VKW 2010), 43.

⁶⁴ Carole Straw, “Martyrdom,” in Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A., et al. (eds), *Augustine through the ages: An encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans), 538-542, here 539. Cf. Chadwick, *Augustine*, 75-86.

⁶⁵ Cf. Roger-Pol Droit, *Das Abendland: Wie wir uns und die Welt sehen* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2010), 84.

9:38-41).⁶⁶ In his reasoning of the church as a mixed body (*corpus permixtum*) Augustine pointed out that only God will separate sinners and saints in the final judgment.⁶⁷ But in the case of rigorist churches, Catholics would not wait but “punished” them. This appears to be a reversal of the apostle’s command: “Are you not to judge those inside?” (1 Cor 5:12). As Searle Bates observed, “The influence of St. Augustine, tremendous during the Middle Ages, likewise in Luther’s attitudes and in various strands of modern thought, was thrown toward compulsion.”⁶⁸

The Jews were also affected by the Constantinian shift.⁶⁹ In Kraus’s view the established church no longer wanted to be on the move and wait for the kingdom of God.⁷⁰ Instead she celebrated her cultic Christ, whom she had wrested from the history of the coming kingdom of God. The church transformed history and the eschatological way into a circle whose centre had to be the ritually celebrated and dogmatically stabilised Christ. From this circle the Jews were banished – in the “Christian Empire” since Constantine and by the Law Code of Justinian. The miracle of redemption was kept within the “only saving church” and triumphantly pointed out against Jews and Gentiles. According to Kraus, the main questions of the Synagogue to the church were: Is the world really redeemed? In what sense is it redeemed? Where are the signs of redemption to be seen? And even the silent existence of the Jews is calling into question the static and self-assured existence of Christians.⁷¹ This is not the picture of an attractive and inviting movement of good news.⁷² It rather gives the impression that the Christendom church had become a usurper – like her patron Constantine.⁷³ In the words of Murray, “The logic of the Christendom shift led inexorably to totalitarian control and Inquisition.”⁷⁴ The more monopolistic churches resorted to violence and manipulation, the more they

⁶⁶ Wilfried Eckey, *Das Markusevangelium: Orientierung am Weg Jesu* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998), 253.

⁶⁷ See McGrath, *Christian theology*, 409: “Contrary to the Augustinian view, proponents of the believers’ church reject any definition of the church as a mixed body of believers and unbelievers.” Cf. “Believers’ church,” in Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling (eds), *Pocket dictionary of theological terms* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999), 19.

⁶⁸ M. Searle Bates, *Religious liberty: An enquiry* (New York: International Missionary Council, 1946), 138-139.

⁶⁹ Cf. Carter’s formulation “Hating God’s people in the name of God: Christian Anti-Judaism,” in *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 86.

⁷⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Systematische Theologie im Kontext biblischer Geschichte und Eschatologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1983), 104. Cf. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 131.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷² Cf. Raymond G. Helwick, S.J., *The crisis of confidence in the Catholic church* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), xxii-xxiii.

⁷³ Cf. Manfred Clauss, “Konstantin,” in *RGG*, 4th ed., vol.4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 1618-1619. See also Niebuhr, *Staaten*, 105.

⁷⁴ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 112.

undermined the persuasiveness of their message and eroded Christianity's reputation far into the future.

The end of Christendom is dated differently. Several thinkers maintain that we are in a long transition period before this reality will finally collapse.⁷⁵ Yet other authors like Hunter suggest that it lasted only "until the Renaissance and Reformation periods of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries," whereas the "secularization process began in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, stamped by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the modern city which dislocated peoples from their traditions."⁷⁶ In any case, as Richardson noted, the "disintegration of Christendom began at the close of the Middle Ages with the rise of nationalism, the Reformation and the inevitable secularization of society which followed the Renaissance."⁷⁷ Thus, the current transitional crisis is the culmination of a process that lasted at least 500 years. Kraemer mentions that, "The steadily growing slow process of secularization in the cultural, political and social spheres" has challenged the status quo and "has meant the gradual shattering of this *Corpus Christianum*."⁷⁸ But this dissolution of century-old ties was not a linear process. Newbigin argues that the "breakdown of Christendom" took place slowly at first, "but later more and more rapid."⁷⁹ At the end of this evolution stands the transition from the mediaeval ideal of Christendom to Post-Christendom in a culture that had seen itself as Christian for many centuries. It is obvious that the driving forces of this process were and are opposed to the enforced uniformity, the pressure to conformity, and the inauthenticity of a forced confession that are associated with the history of Christendom. That indicates that there is no way back. Instead, there is a need to thoroughly analyse the new Post-Christendom situation with its dynamic changes, and find adequate responses to it.

4. Conclusion

The religious-political construct of Christendom is certainly a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and its assessment depends on the respective eschatological and ecclesiological view: "How people view Constantine and the subsequent political recognition of Christianity, whether positively or negatively," is, according

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁶ George G. Hunter III, *The contagious congregation: Frontiers in evangelism and church growth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 85-86; See also Poe, *Christian witness*, 21.

⁷⁷ Alan Richardson, "Christendom," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds), *A new dictionary of Christian theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), NDCT, 94; On the Reformation's contribution see George W. Hunter III, *How to reach secular people* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 27.

⁷⁸ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian message in a Non-Christian world* (New York / London: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 27.

⁷⁹ Leslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 1; Cf. Hunter III, *Contagious Congregation*, 85-86.

to Snyder, “a key indicator of their models of church and kingdom.”⁸⁰ Despite the contemplated violent parts of its history, the Constantinian alliance contributed to an impressive civilisation⁸¹ that contained and preserved many Judeo-Christian values to the present day, although these values are eroding rapidly. And it is to be regretted that the abuse of power and power-games also happen in former non-conformist churches and para-church organisations. However, in the New Testament, such behaviour is unambiguously denounced as destructive and sinful (e.g. 3 John 9-11). Yet in the structures of Christendom it seems to have been system-immanent for many centuries. The misuse of power and persecution in the history of the church is a contradiction to the liberating gospel of Christ, whose kingdom is both spiritual and nonviolent (John 18:36).⁸² This obscuration of the good news is certainly one of the biggest obstacles to the faith of many contemporaries. An examination of the Christendom era clearly contributes to the study of the conditions of religious freedom and persecution. The Constantinian shift obscured the nature and mission of the church, had serious soteriological implications, and its compulsion to religious uniformity resulted inevitably in the loss of religious liberty for all religious dissenters. Certainly the Post-Christendom crisis goes beyond mere structural or denominational issues. In a recent contribution, Anglican bishop John Finney concludes that “Christendom is slipping away – bit by bit it is being stripped from us . . . We are entering a new world . . . We have to go back before the age of Christendom . . . and take the gospel to people who know nothing about it.”⁸³ It will be a new challenge for this and the coming generations of Christians to navigate through unknown territory without using the outdated maps of Constantinianism. On reflection, one is forced to conclude that the experiences of former non-conformist movements and today’s persecuted Christian communities may rather provide orientation for the future.

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⁸⁰ Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 164.

⁸¹ Yet religious freedom is an achievement of non-conformist churches. Cf. Thomas Schirmacher, “Christianity and Democracy,” in *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 2/2 (2009), 73-85, here 75. Thomas Weißenborn, *Religionsfreiheit: Christliche Wahrheit und menschliche Würde in Konflikt?* (Marburg: Francke, 2003), 9.

⁸² Cf. Josef Ratzinger Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 2 (Freiburg: Herder, 2011), 214.

⁸³ John Finney, “Leadership in mission: The stripping of the Church,” in *Theologische Beiträge* 45 (2014), 267-283, here 282.

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