

# The Gloaming of Christendom: Christianity at the End of Whatever This Is

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*The gloaming comes, the day is spent,  
The sun goes out of sight,  
And painted is the Occident  
With purple sanguine bright.*

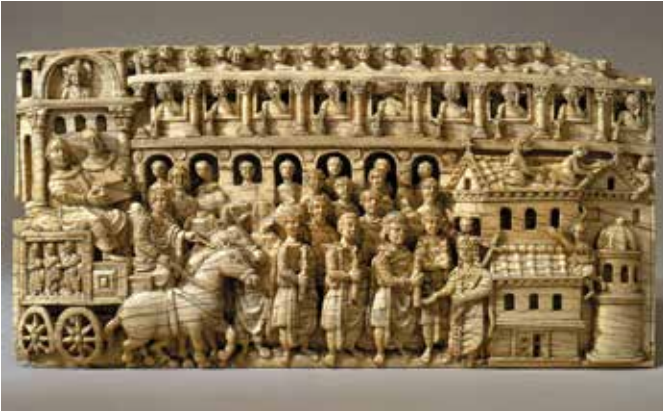
— Alexander Hume,  
*Story of a Summer Day*

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, historians started to consider that they had gotten the Middle Ages all wrong. The glimmering light of antiquity had not been extinguished in a moment, like a snuffed-out candle. Rather, the ancient world had slowly faded away, like the sunset, like the light slowly dimming before you realize, in an instant, that it is no longer there. Like so many things in Classics, the Germans got there first. The brilliant Austrian art historian Alois Riegl was the first to use the term *Spätantike* to describe that period of transition between the ancient world and the medieval one, which was in some ways still very much our world. The term first appeared in English around 1945, but it was not until the 1970s that English speakers would catch on to the concept—and when they did it was in a big way. Peter Brown's 1971 *The World of Late Antiquity* became a seminal work in classics and medieval studies because it offered a radical interpretation of the period between the second and eighth centuries. Breaking free from the reverential grasp of Renaissance

and Enlightenment thinkers, Brown boldly argued that the period between the ancient and medieval world was not one of decay from a glittering golden age to a dark one à la Edward Gibbons, but a time of genuine cultural innovation: not a sorrowful era of collapse, but an exciting moment of change.

It does seem odd that Christians have ever thought otherwise about this period. For this is the very moment in human history when Christianity rose from an occasionally persecuted cult on the margins of Judaism to the dominant religious and cultural force throughout the whole of the former Roman Empire and lots of places that had remained outside of it, to boot (Swedes were never Roman citizens, but they did eventually become Christians). As Brown and those who came after him demonstrated, late antiquity was so innovative precisely because Christianity was coming to power, fundamentally undermining the structures and paradigms that had knit society together since the Bronze Age. It was a significant and, one must imagine, often traumatic change, one that occurred over centuries and in fleeting moments. Within a few hundred years, everything had changed.

Then, after the upheaval of late antiquity, not much changed for centuries. Technologies progressed, of course.



Public procession as an emperor accompanied by bishops brings holy relics to a basilica. Trier Adventus Ivory, ca. 4th century. Cathedral Treasury, Trier, Germany.

Empires rose and fell. Europeans arrived in the Americas. Rome and Constantinople broke with each other and then Martin Luther broke with Rome. History continued, sometimes in shocking, profound, and grand ways. But for most people living in Europe and later in those regions colonized and settled by Europeans, what was at the core of their social and cultural life continued in an unbroken thread for roughly 1500 years. At the center of this continuity was the civic, empirical Christianity that had first asserted itself in late antiquity. Their civilization was a continuous one in large part because it was a Christian one. A time traveler from 800 to 1800 would clearly notice that the world had spun forward. But in those things that matter most, he would not be too shocked. The vast majority still lived rural lives and bowed to a distant monarch whom they likely could not identify should he stand before them. Nearly everyone, save for a few eccentric intellectuals and marginalized Jews, called themselves Christian and were actively engaged in Christian religious practice. Our time traveler would have no problem understanding his hosts when it came to gender and sex, marriage and family. He would not be shocked if slaves brought him his night clothes. The thousand

years would seem like nothing at all. The same cannot be said if a time traveler came from 1800 to 1960 or 2000 or 2021. That is because the world before late July 1914 was a very different world than the one after it. The First World War was a rupture on par with Diocletian's and Constantine's radical imperial reforms. And everything that has happened since the War to End All Wars suggests, among other things, that the Christian Era that rose in the twilight of late antiquity is now experiencing its own gloaming, headed the way of the Bronze Age-born civilization it replaced.

That is right, ladies and gentlemen, you live in what we shall hereby call the "Late Common Era." We will not call it Late Modernity or Post-Christianity or (worse) Postmodernity. First, those labels are already taken to describe eras, movements, and paradigms much more contrived and obnoxious than what we are discussing here. Instead, we will go with the Late Common Era to highlight the fact that we are at the tail end of the age when people agreed that the date of Christ's birth was a good date from which to start counting time.

In my Roman history class as an undergraduate at Berkeley, nearly twenty years ago, Professor Trevor Murphy cheekily observed that "the Romans of the late republic did not realize it was the *late* republic." But what if they had? I would argue that there are real benefits to realizing that you live at the end of a millennia-long era, in the shocking and confusing period before there is something new. For one thing, such knowledge preserves you from being too precious about the changes occurring all around. It prevents a kind of hysteria from setting in and may encourage you to find the beauty of this sunset. In newspapers

and magazines, on blogs and podcasts (because who reads newspapers and magazines anymore?), everyone seems busy lamenting the loss of their favorite part of the old world. For those of us who still hold a Christian faith, the rapid century-long collapse of organized Christianity is frequently at the top of that list.

If you fear the loss of Christianity as it now exists, frankly, this fear is well-founded. The Christianity we all have known for over a millennium is one born in and suited for this age that is passing away. It is a civic religion in its truest sense, fit for imperial purposes. A foundational cultural institution that asserts its power and authority by wielding influence over worldly sovereigns. One in which popes and patriarchs crown kings and emperors in lavish liturgical rites. It is the Christianity of National Prayer Breakfasts and courtroom Bibles, of chocolateries closed during Lent and liquor stores closed on Sunday.

That Christianity is gone, forever. It is not coming back. Attempts to reverse the process of society's de-Christianization are in vain. Too much has changed, and the fundamental societal narrative is now too hostile to the fundamental Christian narrative to make the previous synergy possible. Anyone who thinks she knows what will be once the dust of societal remodeling settles is, likewise, deeply misguided. We do not know what

is going to replace Christianity at the center of shared lives. But the deep social conflict engulfing so much of the formerly Christian world suggests that whatever thread will come to bind has not yet been found.

On the surface, this might seem distressing for all of us involuntary actors in the great play of human history, but if one truly believes that the Christian faith is a reality and not merely a cultural-historical concept, then the turning of history should be but a footnote. Christianity—and the Judaism from which it emerges—has always posited that, running parallel to the visible secular narrative, is another history, a hidden history guided and protected by the unseen hand of a God who seeks to write another kind of human story. This divine history has always been subversive, a declaration that the world's dominant powers are not the ultimate ones. And *this* truth was hard to discern when, for what was really just a moment in time, the divine narrative seemed to merge in perfect union with the secular one.

The challenge for Christians in our era is not just to adapt to an age when we are no longer in charge, as the dominant ideological group. It is to accept that the history of empires and ideologies rising and falling was never the history we should have been most concerned about. It is to accept that the Son does not set, and that there is only one end of history. ✪



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