



A FRAMEWORK FOR 'WHAT'S NEXT?': RE-ROOTING IN THE CHRISTIAN STORY.

The Editorial introducing this issue of JMP proposes that there are significant changes afoot across the West that make current notions of Christians as exiles or marginalized not only insufficient but misleading for our understanding of mission. As this issue engages the overarching question of 'What's Next?' it proposes that the proper response is a re-engagement with the West's Christian narrative, a re-rooting of life in the Christian story. The issue then builds on this overarching proposal through an examination of what this re-rooting might mean. It engages three themes: 1) discerning church in retrospect, 2) being with the other across difference and 3) seeking the common good.



The Context

Someone who has thought deeply about the question of the West and what's next is the British historian, Tom Holland, author of *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*.^[1] Holland's book argues that across the modern West people continually fail to see that ours is a culture shot through with the Christian story. What creates the blindness is the perjuring presence of the great myth in the midst of a once-dominant liberal narrative, the idea that in the Enlightenment and in rationalism the West recovered the humanism of the pre-Christendom era. If we ask the question: 'What is the Western mind all about?' for Holland the answer must, at a minimum, state that it has everything to do with Christianity. The coming of Christianity was, by any measure, the most revolutionary moment in the formation of the West. Christianity remains the 'waters' in which we swim even if the modern imagination believes that it has been put aside like a child entering adulthood. Holland points out that most of our 'liberal' categories and underlying values are not some set of universal ideas discovered and adumbrated by the Enlightenment but are, in fact, highly culturally contingent, bred out of the depth of Christian heritage and culture. It is almost impossible, Holland suggests, to escape or stand outside the Christian narrative. Holland's conclusions are all the more remarkable because his starting point was to accept the prevailing Enlightenment myth, that Christianity has been an unfortunate interlude preventing the pursuit of progress, reason and the attainment of happiness. It was only as he began to grasp how brutal, and power-driven were the worlds that were shaped without the Christian story that he began to appreciate the revolutionary impact of our Christian inheritance.

In modern Western democracies we have continually failed to grasp how profoundly we are shaped by the Christian story. But now, where we stand in this early part of a new millennium, the Enlightenment/liberal narrative and its attendant myth is rapidly unraveling. We are in the midst of one of those 'shaking' points when established systems come down and our world is opened up to a rebirth. For Holland a metaphor for this imagery comes from a city like San Francisco which sits over the fault line of two massive tectonic plates. When these plates shift the result could be earthquakes of such a scale that the superstructures of the city would crumble. The result would be something far more radical than just a rebuild of what has crumbled, it would be the rebirth of the city itself. This is now our situation in the West. We are in a moment of great shaking that portends the potential of rebirth. Holland is not proposing some romantic recapturing of a particular past nor some Renaissance sense of

ad fontes (back to the sources) but a reckoning with the fact of Christianity's ever-present shaping power in the Western story and its profound capacities to bring a rebirth.

Journal of Missional Practice has been focused on engaging the question Newbigin framed in *Foolishness to the Greeks* about a missionary encounter with the West.^[2] The argument Holland is making in the midst of its unraveling is, in fact, a version of Newbigin's agenda and the legacy his seminal writings have bequeathed to us. We have entered into one of those moments of 'shaking' when established fault lines are coming apart. It is a rebirthing moment when Christian communities can be fully engaged in the question of what's next because, as Newbigin tirelessly argued, contrary to the dominant liberal ideology, Christianity is the core story and without the recovery of this story there is no hope for a re-rooting of the West in a liberating narrative.

The Options

What are the options that lie before us as Western people? Holland suggests there are three overarching alternatives for the West in this new moment. They might be summarized as follows:

1. A refitting of the Enlightenment project through a vigorous attempt to revivify the liberalism that has shaped Western life since the 18th century.
2. A Nietzschean-like acceleration of the competition between competing groups and ideologies for power in the West. This might also be described as identity politics, often drawing on nationalism and sometimes a distorted version of Christianity as a form of nationalism that does not include personal faith.
3. A re-engagement with the Christian narrative that originally founded us as the West (not Nietzsche but St Paul).

These options clarify the locus of the missional question. They focus for us the existential challenge that stands before the churches. It offers the Euro-tribal churches, certainly in North America, the chance to renew their own vocation away from their ecclesiocentric obsessions towards the mission of God. At the same time, this clarifying of options gives another way for us to see the place and importance of the immigrant churches into the West (the '*blessed reflex*').^[3]

[1] Tom Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind* (London: Little, Brown, 2019).

[2] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1986).

[3] Harvey Kwiyani, "Blessed Reflex: African Christians in Europe," *Missio Africanus: The Journal of African Missiology* 3, 1, (2017) 40-49.



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