PART ONE

The Shaking of the Foundations

All changed, changed utterly
W.B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

CHAPTER ONE

The End of Christianity

Some years ago I copied into my note book an aphorism from a Russian writer called V.V. Rozanov: 'All religions will pass, but this will remain: simply sitting in a chair and looking in the distance.' I would like to reverse Rozanov's claim and suggest that religion will remain as long as we sit in that chair looking in the distance. Another way of expressing the same thought is to use the vocabulary of the German theologian Paul Tillich, who did his greatest work in the United States after the Second World War. Tillich said that, in addition to the ordinary matters that preoccupy us, our humanity asks deep questions about the meaning of life. He called this our 'ultimate concern' and the way we respond to it is what we call religion, even though that word has become exclusively associated in people's minds with the supernatural answer to the question. Even if we reply that life has no final meaning, we are still offering that as an answer to our ultimate concern. In fact, this is the reply that is given by the scientist Richard Dawkins: 'Nature is not cruel, only pitilessly indifferent. This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous – indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.'[1] This echoes something that Nietzsche wrote: 'Becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing.'[2] These replies to the question repudiate the idea that there is any kind of supernatural meaning out there beyond us,

but the idea of the ultimate meaninglessness of the universe is itself a response to our concern. Whether it is paradox or irony, the discovery of non-meaning or nihilism is itself a kind of meaning, if only because it means something to *us*, is something we ourselves read from the reality that confronts us. Just as interesting as the answers that Nietzsche and Dawkins give is the fact that they themselves are so passionately engaged in wrestling with the question. It is in the nature of humans to do this; in us, life has started to ask questions about itself. The religious quest is the deepest passion of our nature, because it is prompted by our ultimate concern. Unfortunately, like many aspects of our history, religion has been dominated by special interest groups who claimed that only their answers were true and that everyone else was in error. It is not surprising that this has happened: it is just another example of how the world ran itself for so long. Those in authority not only organised things to suit themselves, they interpreted things to suit themselves. It didn't matter what the system was, as long as they called the shots.

The folly of subjecting the religious passion to the politics of power is that it cannot be controlled in this way and refuses to be subject to external direction. I suspect that this is what the writer and film-maker Dennis Potter meant when he said just before his death: 'Religion to me has always been the wound not the bandage.'[3] This is a particularly difficult statement for religious officials to live with, especially if they work for religions of salvation. By definition, religions of salvation are in the bandage business; they have come to heal our wounds. They do not sit alongside us in the chair looking in the distance, comparing points of view; they want to protect us from what we might discover for ourselves, by telling us what

the official view is and how dangerous it will be for us if we do not accept it. Or, to mix the metaphor slightly, they want to sell us their special spectacles, which have been theologically tested by experts to give us maximum power for long-distance looking. Given the extraordinary energy and variety of the human species, none of this should surprise us, but buyers should always beware of sellers. By definition, sellers want to move their product, whether it is a Mercedes or a metaphysic. To punish the metaphor a little longer, in the culture of global capitalism everything has become a commodity, including religion. The most blatant exponents of religious consumerism are North American television evangelists, the best of whom are brilliant salespersons. But even the subtler and more traditional religions try to push their brands. None of this would particularly matter if it were a case of the rival systems inviting us to view reality from where they were sitting: 'Come, try our view and see if you'd like to build your dwelling place at our bend in the river.' Though something like that is beginning to happen today, in the past, religion, like everything else, was dealt with in an authoritarian way. We were told, for our own good, what to think and what to look at; and we were told, for our own good, what not to think and what not to look at. And because religious leaders believed they were dealing with momentous issues that determined eternal destinations, religions tended to be at war with each other. It is no accident that the vocabulary of religious vituperation is so gross, particularly in the Christian tradition and even more particularly in the long feud between Catholics and Protestants. We get riled with each other when it is difficult if not impossible to establish the truth in disputed areas. We don't beat each other up over multiplication tables, but we

get very agitated about religion and politics, because it is impossible to establish their incontrovertible truth.

The fascinating thing about our own day is that our attitude to these matters is beginning to change. If I can use the Rozanov metaphor one last time: today we positively revel in and celebrate the fact that there are almost as many chairs for distance-gazing as there are people to sit in them. Today there is no universally accepted answer to the question posed by our ultimate concern. The dominant characteristic of what is called post-modernity is the absence of agreement on the core meanings and values that undergird the human experience. Scholars call these underground streams of value and meaning 'metanarratives' and they tell us that the main characteristic of our society is its lack of agreement on how to understand and order human communities. In their language, we have no common metanarrative. We describe our society today as 'multicultural' and its values as 'plural'. The leaders of most religious institutions deplore this situation, for fairly obvious reasons. They talk contemptuously of 'pick and mix' Christians or 'cafeteria Catholics' who take what they want from traditional religious systems and ignore what is not congenial. While unattractive, their dyspepsia is understandable. After all, if you are invested in the proclamation of a particular system of meaning and value, which you believe to be not one among many, but the only true and saving one, then you are bound to be disturbed by the new plural culture. Religious officials feel the way all monopolists feel when competition invades their market place: they resent it, precisely because it threatens their dominance. Another important characteristic of post-modernity, which is reflected in effective business ventures, is the flattening

of hierarchies and the sharing of patterns of governance. Though still more honoured in theory than in practice, there is also a commitment to equal treatment for women and sexual and ethnic minorities. All of this is in marked contrast to life in traditional religious systems, such as Christianity.

Like an ancient galleon that has spent ages at sea, Christianity is encrusted with customs and attitudes acquired on its voyage through the centuries and it is making the tragic mistake of confusing the accidents of theological and cultural history with eternal truth. Callum G. Brown in his book, *The Death of Christian Britain,* claims that the single most important element in the free-fall in church attendance in Britain is the resistance in the churches to the feminist revolution.[4] The classic sociological account of the decline of religious observance in Britain was what was called 'secularisation theory'. The idea was that the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution gave birth to a new kind of consciousness that was inimical to religion and began the process of its dissolution. While there is clearly something in secularisation theory, Brown challenges many of its essential elements. One of the elements of the theory was that the Industrial Revolution alienated the working classes from Christianity. Brown dismisses that claim and shows that working class Britain was heavily involved in various forms of evangelical religion until fairly recently. The boom time in working class religiosity in Britain was the mid 1950s, of which the success of Billy Graham's crusades in 1954 was more a symptom than a cause. What Brown calls the background discourse of this period was the evangelical economy of salvation and it was a highly gendered discourse.

This is where I find his narrative convincing, because it

exactly mirrors my own theological experience. Traditional Christianity was based on very rigid gender roles. Women were subordinated to men as far as leadership went, but were viewed as spiritually superior to them and sent by God to restrain and civilise them. All of this was based on a particular reading of the Bible as well as on a particular stage of social evolution, and it still lies behind the nostalgia that characterises the debate about the family in Britain and the USA. When Christian feminists started challenging these stereotypes, traditionalists argued against them, claiming that changes in gender roles would undermine the whole biblical system and nothing would remain unchallenged. During the debate on the ordination of women, I remember arguing against the traditionalists on the grounds that they were exaggerating the effect that ordaining women would have. This was not a revolution, I argued, it was a tiny adjustment of the dial of history to accommodate changes in relationships between women and men. The ministry would not be affected by admitting women, it would only be widened slightly. Everything would go on as before, except that there would now be women wearing dog collars. We would get used to the change, as we did when women doctors arrived on the scene, and after a few months we would think nothing of it. Not so, argued the traditionalists: make this change and, in time, the whole edifice will fall. Historic Catholic Christianity is all of a piece, a minutely articulated whole; if you take one piece out of the structure, the whole thing will fall apart. If you question an element as central as this, you substitute human judgement for divinely revealed truth and the whole system will collapse like a stack of cards.

Though their motive was wrong, the prediction made by

the traditionalists is gradually coming true, and it is one of the main elements in Brown's revisionist theory of church decline. In a remarkably short period after 1963 the edifice started to crumble, except for a few defensive redoubts that still guard the old tradition with increasing desperation. What finished off Christianity in Britain, therefore, was not the slow creep of secularism, but the swift success of the women's movement. That is Brown's central claim. He is well aware of the way the experience of the United States appears to contradict his thesis, but his response is instructive:

> The way of viewing religion and religious decline in Britain offered in this book should have wider applicability. It may help to explain the near contemporaneous secularisation of Norway, Sweden, Australia and perhaps New Zealand, and should help to account for the rapid secularisation of much of Catholic Europe since the 1970s. Critically, it may help to explain the North American anomaly. Throughout secularisation studies from the 1950s to the 1990s, the United States and Canada have seemed difficult to fit in the British model of religious decline. A supposedly obvious 'secular' society of the twentieth century has sustained high levels of church-going and church adherence. Debate on this has gripped American sociologists of religion for decades without apparent resolution. Perhaps the answer lies in seeing the same discursive challenge as Britain experienced *emerging* in North America in the 1960s, but then not *triumphing*. A discursive conflict is still under way in North America. The Moral Majority and the evangelical fight back has been sustained in public rhetoric in a way not seen in Europe. North American television nightly circulates the traditional evangelical narrative of conversionism . . . and a discursive battle has raged since the 1960s. Secular

> post-hippy culture of environmentalism, feminism and freedom for sexuality co-exists beside a still-vigorous evangelical rhetoric in which home and family, motherhood and apple pie, are sustaining the protocols of gendered religious identity. Piety and femininity are still actively enthralled to each other, holding secularisation in check. In Foucaldian terms, North America may be experiencing an overlap of epistemes (of modernity and post-modernity).[5]

The fundamental issue in this debate is not whether you or I prefer the traditional evangelical version of gender identity to the post-modern feminist interpretation, but whether it is right to claim the traditional version as exclusively Christian. We all have preferences in life and sometimes we are more comfortable with the way things were than with the way things are. Some people like to be old fashioned, some people like to be absolutely *au courant*. Sometimes we even twist back on ourselves and establish a *retro-look*, in which we give a contemporary spin to a previous model, whether in clothing or furnishing. Post-modernism is so plural it can even find a place for yesterday or for last century in its design. Society is full of interesting survivals of this sort, including groups who exist to promote the restoration of various European monarchies. In Scotland there are groups that plan for the return of the House of Stuart to a renewed Scottish monarchy. They gather from time to time in out-of-the-way buildings, dramatically swathed in coloured cloaks, to plan the return of the king from over the water, who, though a genetic descendant of the Stuarts, is probably an elderly Portuguese wine exporter. There is no harm in this. It's all part of the heritage industry and our endearing nostalgia for extinct cultures and their artefacts. The big question

for the churches is whether they are so identified with the values of a previous culture that they are incapable of adapting to its successor. The culture wars of North America, in which Christianity is identified not only with a particular version of gender relationships, but with a hatred of sexual minorities and contemporary human freedoms, is a prospect that dismays Christians who are at ease in the new culture of post-modernity. Of course, one can prefer a particular culture without being blind to its defects. Every way of ordering society has its shadow side, and post-modernity is no exception. The issue is not whether it is imperfect, but whether any other way of ordering society, including the one associated with religious conservatism, would be significantly better. The fundamental question is whether it is right for Christianity to identify previous cultural arrangements exclusively with the mind of God. Human experience would suggest that out-of-date systems are no more likely to be perfect than up-to-date systems. The fact is that up-to-date is where most of us are, for better or for worse, and there is a lot to be said for accepting rather than running from the situation in which we find ourselves.

We now see the human struggle to discover meaning and value as an enterprise that produces many approaches, many answers, and we believe that there is something of value in that very variety. Geneticists talk about the phenomenon of 'hybrid-vigour' when different races inter-breed, and the same can be said of mixing cultures. More negatively, the presence of many systems is a good bulwark against the tendency to abuse that is found in societies where a single system dominates. Monopolies always become arrogant. The relativising effect of other accounts of the human adventure tempers the arrogance

of single systems and moderates the endless contention in societies with two dominant systems. Voltaire understood this: '. . . if you have two religions in your land, the two will cut each other's throats; but if you have thirty religions, they will dwell in peace'.[6] Voltaire expresses the best value of post-modernity in that quotation. When authority, in religion as well as politics, is dispersed among many centres, it helps to neutralise the corrupting and oppressive effects of power. But there is an inevitable rear-guard action on the part of traditional centres of power. We see something of this going on in the political debate about the role of the European Union in the lives of its member states. And we see something of the same dynamic in the relationship between churches and other faith communities. The new ethic of pluralism is difficult for exclusive theological systems to deal with. If you have strongly internalised the belief that your team, whether ethnic or religious, is superior to all others, you will find contemporary multiculturalism difficult to cope with. It will be even more difficult if you believe that your system is exclusively true and no salvation beyond it is possible. Comfortable co-existence with neighbours who are on their way to damnation is an awkward feat to carry off.

There are many casualties of the culture wars in North America, such as the relationships within the family of a Presbyterian minister I heard about. John, a conscientious if unimaginative pastor of large suburban churches, was a characteristic product of early twentieth-century North American Protestantism. A gentle, liberal-minded man of deeply conservative instincts, he had three daughters, two of whom married ordained ministers, while the third married a wealthy stockbroker. Shortly after John's death,

the wife of the stockbroker became a born-again Christian and announced to her mother that she knew that her father was in hell because he had never been converted and given his life to Jesus. Traditional Presbyterianism, apparently, just didn't have the fuel to get souls to heaven. Sick jokes like this one aside, the story illustrates the dilemma that faces Christianity today. There is much in the Christian tradition that can be wheeled in to support the ugly exclusivism of the rich sister's religion. There is plenty of stuff in our past that makes the sentencing of this gentle American pastor to eternal torment mild by comparison. When Callum Brown discussed the contrast between traditional evangelical Christianity and contemporary human experience he focused on the specific role of women, but he could have made the same point in a more general way. The real question at issue is not the consequence for any particular individual of holding to the classic evangelical economy of salvation, but the whole set of assumptions that undergirds it. When Christian traditionalists opposed the emancipation of women within the Church they intuitively understood that the real issue was the authority of the Bible and the religious claims that have been based upon it. If you believe that every word in the Bible is dictated by God, then you are going to have massive problems with contemporary society, particularly with the liberation of women.

Let me come at it from the other side for a moment: if you are a Christian who believes in the freedom of women to order their own destiny, within the normal limitations that define any human life, then you have already started to deconstruct the traditional view of the Bible. A contest has occurred and been resolved, whether you are consciously aware of it or not. The contest is between what you now

believe to be the right of women to the same freedoms and opportunities as men and the traditional, biblical view of their status as intrinsically subordinate to men. As Brown reminded us, the classic Christian attitude to these matters set down a precise and unalterable set of gender identities. That is quite clear, so the choice is obvious. Brown suggests that, because people in Europe and (though perhaps less clearly) in North America have chosen to affirm and celebrate the right of women to embrace roles that were previously closed to them, they have simply abandoned Christianity *en masse* because they believe it to be fundamentally inconsistent with their new consciousness. For these people, the traditional Christian understanding of life is no longer plausible. It is as irrelevant to them as crinolines and stage coaches. It is true that a trickle of refugees from post-modern consciousness continues to seek asylum in traditional religious systems because they find a life of multiple choice difficult to sustain. Even here there is something unmistakably post-modern going on, however, because self-consciously choosing a life-style from a rack of earlier models is a very contemporary thing to do. Riding round London on a high bicycle with an old basket on the handlebars, wearing a carefully tailored three-piece suit and a brown trilby is an example of post-modern retro-chic, especially if you are on your way to a Latin High Mass at Brompton Oratory.

The question for Christianity is whether the options for choice are limited to the two I have described: either abandon Christianity, because it is so manifestly out of tune with what you consider to be the best values of contemporary culture; or cling to a version of Christianity that is profoundly antipathetic to the freedoms of post-modern society. Most people in our culture have already

decided that Christianity is a kind of consciousness that is no longer possible for them, so they have simply abandoned it. Their opposition is fortified when they hear the most vocal group in Christianity today loudly denouncing the very values they have come to cherish. The representatives of traditional Christianity claim that the Bible presents us with a permanently valid way of understanding the universe and ordering human relations within it. Far from reflecting the science and ethics of a particular era of history, they assert that the Bible is fixed and unalterable truth, which no one is at liberty to alter. This is why you will sometimes hear the more tender-hearted among this group of conservative Christians say to homosexual people: we would, on the human level, love to be able to affirm your gay and lesbian relationships, but it is not up to us; God has firmly decreed what is right and what is wrong in this area and our response has to be obedience to that command, no matter how personally sympathetic we are to your situation and the lousy luck that has placed you in this horrible predicament.

Is that it, then? Christianity has already been pushed to the edges as an eccentric type of consciousness that is profoundly antipathetic to contemporary values: are we to witness its slow but inevitable death, apart from a few refugee encampments, here and there? Is there a third approach, which is not a middle way between belief and unbelief and is neither diluted fundamentalism nor watered-down scepticism? There is another group in the game, though whether they will be sent off the field is still an open question, since they tend to be despised by both the other groups as traitors. This group believes that it is possible to be Christian and post-modern, to be a member of a church and a supporter of feminism and the rights

of sexual minorities, in spite of the witness of Christian tradition. It is a radical position, which has uncoupled Christianity from absolute claims about the status of the Bible and tradition. And the thing that broke the chain, as the traditionalists rightly foresaw, was the emancipation of women. Having embraced the ethical imperative of feminism, those of us who are members of this group came to realise that we now read the Bible as a human, not as a divine creation. The issue for those of us who find ourselves in this position is whether we can discover new ways of using the Christian tradition that will deepen our humanity, our care for the earth and for one another. That is the agenda I have set myself in this book.

My working assumption is that the discoveries we have made in our quest for meaning have all come from us, are *all* human constructs. Their existence is testimony to our extraordinary creativity as a species. We are constantly digging for meaning, searching for understanding. Later in this book I shall make use of one of the most influential texts of our era, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argued that, in seeking to understand and interpret the world that lies before us, we have created habits of thought and practice that he called 'paradigms'. These are working systems of interpretation that endure until they are succeeded by systems that do the job better. Ptolemaic astronomy was succeeded by the Copernican system, which was succeeded by Newtonian physics; and so endlessly on. We are astoundingly fertile in our conceptions. There is unlikely to be a final, settled endgame which absolutely establishes everything in some kind of totalistic theory, because it is our nature to go on in our quest for understanding through time and space. It is important to remember that a wise humanity does not

dismiss previous paradigms with contempt or scoff at them as primitive. They were valid interpretations of the world for their time, though they were later succeeded, usually after struggle and contention, by other points of view. If you accept the Kuhnian approach to meaning, then you find yourself in a state of permanent, but relaxed and expectant uncertainty. You don't make absolute claims for your present position, but you allow it to work for you as long as it can, till the next set of revolutionary insights replaces it.

I shall argue in this book that that is the best approach to the great religious narratives and systems that have been such a profound part of the human story. It is obvious that the astronomy of the creation narratives of Genesis no longer works for us, so it is just silly to cling to that ancient paradigm as a piece of descriptive science. It is inevitable that the religious narratives that have come down to us are framed in the science and social norms of their own day. Do we reject them totally for that reason, as many people appear, reasonably, to have done? Is Christianity to be abandoned because of its accidental historical framework, which includes an attitude to women that is profoundly at variance with our own best values today, or does it contain an enduring challenge that needs to be separated from its incidental context? Since I believe that the Christian account of meaning has to be separated from its historical packaging if it is to work for us today, I spend time in this book deconstructing important aspects of the Christian doctrinal tradition, such as original sin, incarnation and resurrection, but my ultimate intention is resoundingly positive. I am more interested in using the power of these great themes for our lives today, than in discarding the ancient containers that convey them to us.

I try to distinguish between the transient and the enduring elements of both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, and suggest that it is better to see them as good poetry than as bad science if they are to have meaning for us today. My aim is to craft from the Christian past a usable ethic for our own time. What I shall propose, however, is not a middle path between those who hold to the old beliefs and those who totally reject them; it will be a way of action. At the heart of Christianity there lies a moral challenge that is as pertinent today as it ever was. I shall argue that it is more important to follow the way of Jesus than to believe or disbelieve the traditional Christian claims about him. If I am right, then the real task for Christianity today is the challenge not to go on interpreting the world in the old way, but to start disturbing it with renewed power.