



Rupert Shortt, *The Eclipse of Christianity: And Why It Matters* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2024), pp. xii + 356, ISBN 978-1399802741. £12.99

In our day there is much discussion about the decline of religion in Western society. A number of publications on the subject have appeared recently in Britain and the United States and the issues they raise are covered in various media outlets. A person does not have to look too far on a search engine to discover theories explaining why Christianity is declining and what the effects will be. Some people, like the writer, activist and Christian convert Ayaan Hirsi Ali, believe that the decline of Christianity in the West is dangerous for civilization because the religion has provided meaning in the lives of its people for centuries.⁴ Richard Dawkins, despite being a confirmed atheist, wishes to keep Christian culture because he ‘feels at home in the Christian ethos’, and has expressed similar anxieties to Ali with regard to the decline of Christianity in the West.⁵ Then there are other intellectuals, such as the British writer and Orthodox Christian convert Paul Kingsnorth, who are against Christianity being tied to civilization and culture.⁶ On this view, if Christianity becomes infused with the things of the world, then it risks corruption.⁷ Christianity is supposed to be universal and therefore no one culture can claim ownership of it. These issues, and more, are raised in reading Rupert Shortt’s book *The Eclipse of Christianity: And Why It Matters*.

Shortt’s book is divided into three parts. Part One is called “Faltering Faith” and deals with issues such as the loss of enchantment in people’s conception of the world, and what Roman Catholics and other Christians have contributed to the world. Part Two, “Earthen Vessels”, discusses how Christians in other parts of the world are persecuted – something that is

⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “Why I am now a Christian: Atheism can’t equip us for civilizational war”, *UnHerd*, 11 November 2023, <https://unherd.com/2023/11/why-i-am-now-a-christian/>.

⁵ Murray Campbell, “‘I am a cultural Christian’ says Richard Dawkins”, *Anglican Ink*, 3 April 2024, <https://anglican.ink/2024/04/03/im-a-cultural-christian-says-richard-dawkins/>.

⁶ See Paul Kingsnorth, “Against Christian civilization”, *First Things*, 12 December 2024, <https://firstthings.com/against-christian-civilization>.

⁷ See Kingsnorth in conversation with the Orthodox icon carver and cultural commentator Jonathan Pageau: “Western civilization is already dead”, 12 January 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrjdaVol2TA>.



not typically covered by the mainstream media – and the purpose of the church. For Shortt, the decline of Christianity in its Middle Eastern homeland is one of the most tragic episodes in the story of modern Christian history. Finally, Part Three, “Cultural Fabric”, explores questions about the rise in artificial intelligence, issues about diversity in the modern world, and the changing spiritual issues of our time. In this review I will focus on three key chapters and evaluate their contents.

In Chapter 1, “A Flight from Enchantment”, Shortt considers the much-discussed decline of Christianity in the West, while pointing out that on a global level the story is quite different – Christianity is growing exponentially in non-Western countries. He says, “The faith continues to expand: at a global level tens of thousands of fresh converts are registered every day across Africa alone. Pentecostalism, the Christian counterpart to Islamic revivalism, has long been spreading at exponential speed across the Global South and in East Asia” (p. 5). One could take this data and say that the issue of disenchantment is primarily a Western one, because other societies and cultures are not fully immersed in a physicalist worldview, or living within a ‘post-truth’ society. It may be easier for Christianity to spread in those countries and cultures where physicalism is not normative and where a religion’s insistence on universal and objective truth is still appealing. This could also be linked to what some see as the excessive individualism of the West and the abandonment of the kind of communities where collective spiritual practices have traditionally flourished. Though one could also look at modern Western people’s fascination with the paranormal and UAP phenomena and conclude that enchantment of the world never left; it has only transformed and transferred. Moreover, in the United States, some political groups who are otherwise associated with a ‘post-truth’ climate continue to claim allegiance to Christianity.

Chapter 6, “A Field Hospital for Sinners”, addresses the failings of the church and its members. Shortt suggests seeing the churches as field hospitals to repair sinners. It is not surprising that scandals continually erupt when the people in churches are flawed and prone to sin. It is sometimes claimed that Christianity has been its own worst enemy in the West. And Shortt notes how the different traditions of Christianity have had their own internal struggles and differences, but the purpose of church traditions is to mould and shape people into God’s vision for humanity. But, despite these difficulties within Christian traditions, Shortt states that God’s vision is not lost, despite the faults of humans. Shortt touches upon



this when talking about the Eucharist in Catholic tradition, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist into the blood and body of Christ. He says, ‘On this understanding the Eucharist is the kiss of a God present to the touch, and [...] as a moment of love and friendship in action, strengthening the mystical body of the church community’ (p. 186). If God the Word is in the Eucharist, then God’s presence is still amongst broken humanity, ever willing and ready to heal the things that are broken within the church all over the globe. He touches further upon this by mentioning that in Christianity, all believers in Christ are bound up with one another in God’s mystical body that transcends time and space. This is the higher order of reality, where believers can reorient themselves into God’s loving plan for humanity. This chapter could be useful for someone interested in doing research into the various scandals in different churches across the world and how their members deal with them, mainly from understanding how healing can be done by remembering that Christians are members of God’s mystical body, with God being the head of that body.

In Chapter 9, “Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence”, Shortt engages with ideas regarding artificial intelligence, diversity, faith healing, and reversing the spiritual attitudes of modernity. Of particular interest are his ideas regarding empathy and his discussion of artificial intelligence, one of the most talked about subjects of our day. He notes how AI programs, like ChatGPT, can produce content that could pass exams, write poetry, and produce software code, which has suggested to some that AI poses an existential threat to humanity. But Shortt reminds us that it can also be used for good, not least through a potential revolution in medicine. Shortt notes that there are those, like Catholic layman and businessman Ian Helps, who believe that the Church ought to be able to help people feel more at ease with concerns about artificial intelligence. Helps is quoted as saying, ‘The Church has much to contribute in easing our discontents [...] Unless we give people very deep support, they’re not going to make it. For me, spiritual renewal will form a major component in addressing both climate change and the challenges of AI’ (pp. 265–66). One thing that would have been useful for the book to have explored is how people within different parts of the Christian community view art made by AI, specifically when it comes to religious art – whether the creation of icons or composition of hymns. There are already people who are beginning to ask these questions, and it would have been interesting to have had Shortt seek people’s views



about AI being combined with worship.⁸ This might have fitted with his discussion on the church easing people's discontent with artificial intelligence.

Overall, Shortt's book is a good introduction for people who want to know about some of the current issues regarding contemporary Western Christianity. Shortt does an excellent job interviewing academics, lay Christians, and non-Christians to get a broad perspective on the spiritual landscape during our times. His book could be utilized for an introductory course on the future of modern Christianity. It is an excellent survey of the challenges and opportunities facing Christianity today.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v32i2.3045>

⁸ Noreen Herzfield, "Is an AI-Generated Icon an Icon? A Case Study in Artificial Intelligence and Christian Spirituality", *Spiritual: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 24, no. 2 (2024): 281–94, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2024.a938556>.

