Chapter 6

21st Century Christianity

“We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”

Jonathan Swift

“If God would but reform the clergy, the people of England would soon be reformed.”

J. I. Packer

6.1 Introduction

This chapter makes a focus on Christianity in the 21st century. We start with a focus on the ideology that was Christendom, tracing its origins, rise, and decline, in order to appreciate the present context. We find that Christendom represented a political alliance between church and state that, in many ways, compromised the church, and represented a secular invasion into it. The persecutions of the early church were abated, although the influences of the Roman Empire and imperial court remain to this day in church buildings, in the distinction of clergy from laity, in the passive nature of worship, and in many other ways. In accordance with those
theologians who find religion to be a “human construction.” Christianity in Christendom is, in many ways, the ultimate defiance, inhibiting both “faith” and God’s self-revelation.

If there is dispute within the church as to whether Christendom was a “defiant construction” or not, there is no doubt within the secular world that Christianity has largely failed. We then move on to consider some of the general failures of Christianity within the context of the secular world. The main objections include (1) the wars, violence, and persecutions enacted in the name of Christian religion, (2) the oppression that distorted religion brings (e.g. in colonialism), (3) the moral depravity and failure of its adherents, sometimes especially its leadership, and (4) the intellectual objections against its metaphysical components, and the contradictory approaches to its teaching, with huge differences in theological interpretation of the claimed central “truths.”

We move on to consider one of the most distinctive elements of Christianity, that is, the community of those who believe. The Christian community, unlike any other religious community, is one commissioned to be by the divine; it is of supernatural origin at Pentecost where the New Testament church was born. The question of what is the church is at once simple and complex. It is not a building, but may mean a local congregation or the worldwide community of those who believe in Christ; it sometimes refers to those who have already died and believers who will be. Distinguishing the essence of church from its expression is important. Churches today do not necessarily look like first-century churches. This may have a bearing on the role of technology in church. Community and witness are two distinguishing elements of the essence of church.

The objective of this chapter is to describe the context of Christianity in the 21st century by outlining its origins in Christendom, and examining the failures of Christianity, which by default have been failures within Christendom, the ways that Christianity has not enabled “transcendence” promised or sought by adherents. We also seek to consider the question of “what is the church,” distinguishing between the “essence” and “expression” of church; and the tension between community and institution that has existed. We want to point to the crisis that exists within the church today, and the general decline of participation in the organised church. This context provides the background to understanding the synthesis of technology and religion that is enabling new expressions.